Bluebell

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Summary

Hannibal whispered into his hair, holding him to his chest in an odd mixture of delicacy and desperation. Holding him like he was some beautiful, precious thing.

Will held him back, his anchor in the storm that raged around them.

***

Will Graham never asked to be dragged into the Hunger Games, had never expected it, but had always considered it. Growing up with the reaping hanging over his head once a year, he'd become used to the possibility of disaster, however small that possibility was.

What he hadn't prepared for was Hannibal Lecter and his dark eyes, promising nothing but danger.

Notes

before you read, to clarify: the attempted rape/non-con is not between will and hannibal and i will warn the chapter that it's in

this fic will get more fast paced when hannibal comes into it and when the games start but please forgive me for the first few slow chapters, its every writers worst nightmare but you gotta set the scene

Chapter 1

The dim beginnings of day filtering through the window, projecting warmth and light onto his face, was what woke him on the morning of the reaping. He peeled open his eyes reluctantly, shifting in his bed, dread already encompassing him about the day ahead. It was foolish, he knew- the poorer kids rarely ended up as tributes, as one of the other richer, better trained children usually volunteered immediately after. It was a truth he told himself this all year round, repeated like a prayer, but every reaping he couldn't stop the lasting feeling of unease creep through him, telling him that it was still a possibility. It *could* happen. He shouldn't start relaxing.

This year, however, the stakes were even higher.

Because Abigail was in the running this year.

Speaking of Abigail, he could see her hunched figure curled into a ball on the other bed, could see that she was shaking ever-so-slightly with silent sobs.

“Abigail,” he whispered.

She wasn't technically his sister, when referring to blood kin. Her mother had been found with her throat slit, her father nowhere to be seen, when she was only two. There weren't any services in the Districts to help with these kinds of things, even the wealthy ones, so as their neighbours, his parents had decided that taking her in was the right thing to do. The Peacekeepers hadn't objected; she was nothing more than an unimportant, helpless child to them. To Will, she was family, blood relative or not. They'd grown up together, and that was all that counted, right?

“Hey, hey, come on,” he soothed, finally rising from his bed and making his way over to the other side of the room. He perched beside her. "It'll be okay."

“How do you *know?”* Abigail whimpered, rolling over to face him, tears smeared across her cheeks like rain.

“We're a Career district, Abigail. I've heard at least ten girls in the past few days talk about volunteering,” he argued. “Plus, you're twelve. Your name's only in there once.”

“Your name isn't,” she said, lower lip trembling.

That was true. At sixteen, his name would be in there five times already. But despite District 4 being one of the richer districts, that didn't mean that poor people didn't exist there. A dead father and seamstress mother didn't exactly pool in the money, meaning Will's odds had been increased to ten chances of death, rather than five. It was always something he hated on this day, but the other days, the harder, hungrier ones, tesserae was more important. It was about priorities. Who was to die: him, or his family?

“I've also heard boys talk about volunteering,” he offered, smiling reassuringly. “We'll be fine.”

“You and I both know that *talking* about volunteering doesn't mean they'll *do* it,” Abigail rebuffed, and she wasn't *wrong*. People got ahead of themselves, sometimes. They thought they'd be able to do it but when they got there it was just too much, and they chickened out. But usually- not always, but usually- the tributes from District 4 were volunteers.

“Abigail, everything will be okay,” he said firmly, and when she opened her mouth to disagree, he interrupted her. “I promise.”

She closed her mouth at this, nodding in resignation. When Will made her promises, he always kept them. Voice soft, he urged her to try getting more sleep, and she huffed in compliance, turning back on her side. Waiting until her breathing levelled out and her posture relaxed, he stood and stretched. He dressed silently and quickly, exiting the house and walking into the quiet streets, the faint light of dawn hitting his face.

The lack of people wasn't surprising. It was early, but it was more than that: today was the reaping. He didn't pass anyone as he carried on, and there was nobody at the river by the time he arrived. Sighing, he toed off his shoes and socks, rolling up his pants and sitting on the riverbank as he slipped his calves into the water. The cold made him gasp, but it woke him up more, shocking his system into alertness. Into startling, gripping terror, rather than the groggy fear from the morning. It clogged his throat, brought that familiar panic that only Beverly could dispel. Good thing he was waiting for her.

“Hey,” she murmured from behind him a few minutes later, and Will heard some shuffling as she removed her footwear. She joined him in sitting, mirroring his position, and couldn't stay silent for a minute before uttering a question, “you okay?”

Will smiled. In spite of being fairly quiet himself, Bev's incessant talking was comforting, especially today.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “You?”

“Yeah.”

So much for talking. There wasn't much to say, he supposed. Not on a day like this.

Meeting here was traditional for them. Bev was his best friend, so she usually knocked at his house before school so they could walk together, but on weekends they'd meet up here, and just talk, for hours. On most days there would be fishermen here, and the constant buzz of their voices in the background had become familiar over the years. Without them, Will was on edge.

“How's Abigail holding up?” Bev asked, breaking the strained silence.

“Not good,” Will answered with a grimace, finally glancing over to her.

She was as much his sister as Abigail was, in some ways, and it wasn't far-fetched to assume that familiarity extended to the two girls. Beverly had been a constant fixture in his life since forever, since before Abigail was even born, and when she was, when she grew, losing her parents and moving next door, Bev had been there for it all.

“She's only in once, right?” she checked, and at Will's nod, she continued, “so why's she so worried?”

“She's twelve, Bev. Of course she's worried, even if it is irrational. And she isn't just scared for herself. She's also scared for me, and although she didn't mention it, you.”

Beverly's face softened. “We'll be okay.”

“I know.”

It was a lie, and they both knew it. Will could promise Abigail all he wanted, but it didn't stop him from being the tiniest bit worried. Yes, they were a career district, and yes, there were likely to be volunteers, but *what if?* It was a small chance, but it was possible. He, Bev, or even Abigail could get reaped. It was his worst nightmare, one that would keep him up all hours of the night if his brain deemed it necessary. Bev slid her hand down to grasp his where it rested next to him, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Will managed to give her a weak smile in return, but he knew she wasn't convinced.

“Who do you think it'll be?” he asked.

“I don't know. I've heard a lot of people talk about volunteering. But then, that happens every year. Most of them don't have the guts.”

“Some of them do.”

“Some,” she repeated, allowing him that. “Only some. And occasionally… well. Occasionally, nobody volunteers at all.”

“Are you saying it might be one of those years?”

“I don't know. No, not really,” she clarified. “I just… have a bad feeling. I know it sounds stupid, because everyone gets a bad feeling on this day, every year. But I can't help think: what if?”

“What if you get reaped?” he asked, thinking the same, and she nodded, face solemn. “Then you learn how to survive. Get sponsors. Train. Do whatever you need to do. Then come back in one piece. Come home.”

“I wouldn't win. You know that.”

“Then don't get reaped,” he snapped, regretting it before it even left his mouth. “I'm sorry. I'm just… nervous.”

Nervous wasn't a good enough word to describe the way he felt. It wasn't *nearly* good enough. There was no word to describe the awful anxiety he always got on the day of the

reaping, that fear that had him unable to sleep and awake at the crack of dawn, incapable of functioning for most of the day. But Bev understood really, everyone their age who was untrained did. So did the parents. It was a collective distress that was spread throughout Panem today. All of Panem but the Capitol, of course.

“Wish Abigail luck for me,” Bev said once the sun hadn't risen higher, teetering above them in the sky, and they'd made their short trip home.

Abigail smiled at the sentiment as he repeated it to her over breakfast, a meagre meal of bread and cheese. Will treasured the smiles she gave him, little reminders of her innocence and youth that he tucked away in his heart for a rainy day. He never wanted her to grow up.

After breakfast he washed languidly, scrubbing himself clean from the smell of the river and submerging himself in the water, abandoning any possibility of making his curls presentable. When he eventually left the small tub, he dried and dressed in his best clothes, towelling his messy hair viciously. Looking in the mirror, shining like the surface of the water, he could do nothing but sigh in resignation at his reflection. His hair was a lost cause, like usual, but to give himself some credit, he didn't look too bad today. Compared to the Capitol lot he'd look severely under-dressed, however.

No.

He wouldn't be going to the Capitol. He had to stop thinking like that.

Sitting out on the front step to wait didn't slow the racing of his mind, however, and he worried that nothing would. Nothing but the ending of this dreadful, endless day. It wasn't until he was approached by a few of the stray dogs that hung around the District that he felt a prick of relaxation, comforted by the knowledge that things seemed to be going like usual. If he shut his eyes, could he imagine that today was no different from any other?

“I'm sorry, buddy. I don't have any food for you today,” he apologised, scratching behind the ears of a particularly small dog.

Buster, Will liked to call him.

Abigail's hand was clammy as they walked to the square. Her grip on his arm was iron-clad, terrified, and his heart broke for her. His first reaping had been a horrible experience too. Being twelve years old, knowing that you, a sibling or a friend could be sent to an almost-certain death, was horrifying. No child deserved it. But then, the Capitol didn't care about that. Children in the Districts were just entertainment for them. They were willing to watch twenty-three of them *die* on television every year, they didn't care about them being *scared*. Will was so, so scared. Abigail was scared. It was obvious as she pulled him to one side when they reached their destination, the setting for their own personal massacre.

“I don't want to get reaped,” she admitted quietly, her voice barely a whisper.

“You won't be,” Will confirmed, and dragged her in for a hug, holding her tightly. “I swear it.”

She sniffled slightly as she stepped away, her eyes red-rimmed, but nodded, and headed toward the roped off area for kids aged twelve, moving to Marissa amongst the sea of worried, young faces. Will followed suit, but instead went to the group of children who were sixteen, and looked to the stage. There were three chairs. One belonged to the mayor, a dull but well-meaning man who made sure that children got trained every year. Another was for Freddie Lounds, the escort of the District, who never failed to grate him with her shrill voice and brash appearance. The last was for Jack Crawford. If Will was reaped, Jack would be his mentor. In the few official public appearances he made each year, he seemed to be reserved and level-headed, a man trying his best to keep the tributes from his District alive. Will liked him.

When the time came, the mayor stood up and walked to the podium to talk in a drawling voice about how wonderful the Capitol was, and Will tuned him out. It was the same every year. Instead, he craned his neck to try and spot Beverly, but had no luck. He jolted back to himself when Freddie Lounds got up to speak, the copper of her ringlets bouncing as she walked.

“Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favour!” she declared in that irritating voice of hers, and Will did his best not to outwardly sigh. She was an added annoyance to an already stressful day. It was like the Capitol were trying to make it as horrible for them as it could possibly be. Which… they probably were, really. Some odd display of dominance over the Districts, or something. “Can I just say what an honour it is for me to be here?”

What a *joke*. The only honour for Freddie Lounds was the amount of publicity she received. Everyone knew that. But he still watched with bated breath as she trotted over to the glass ball full of girls names, still buzzed with anticipation as she drew it out, twisting her hand around for what seemed like forever, long nails scraping against the clearness, before finally picking a piece of paper out with a flourish.

Crossing back over to the podium, she read the name off of the slip, voice ringing throughout the square and Will felt his world end.

“Abigail Graham.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No.

His chest seized up, his mouth went dry, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't *breathe.*

“Abigail Graham? Where are you?” Freddie prompted.

Will stared at his sister as she stumbled out of the crowd, beginning to take trembling steps toward the stage. It seemed impossible. It had to be a dream, a nightmare, *surely*. Abigail's name was in there once. *Once.* She finally reached the stage, and stiffly walked up to Freddie, standing stock still, and made eye contact with Will.

He had promised her.

“Ah, Abigail. Nice to meet you. Before we carry on, are there any volunteers?” Freddie asked, addressing the crowd of children.

Children. God, they were all just children.

It was silent. There *had* to be volunteers- Will had heard so many people talk about it. This was District 4, they almost *always* produced careers. But nobody stepped forward. Will vaguely noted that he was crying, tears were seeping down his cheeks, and his heart felt like a solid rock in his chest. At first, he could only watch in horror, and as the silence stretched on, he could barely even do that.

“I volunteer.”

The quiet, animal sound of relief that fell from his lips was entirely involuntary. It was over. She was *saved*. But… Will recognised that voice.

Beverly walked out into the open, resolutely not looking at Will, and quickly made her way up to the stage, gently ushering Abigail away while she protested.

“Well done you!” Freddie congratulated. “What's your name?”

“Beverly Katz.”

“Beverly Katz! The new tribute for District 4!”

Freddie beamed encouragingly, clapping in a way that sounded raucous in the silent square until the crowd did the same, joining in reluctantly, as they always did. The clapping ceased fairly quickly, and Freddie went over to the other glass ball to pick the boy tribute. Eventually, she read out a name, but Will didn't care. It wasn't him. It wasn't Will.

He remembered, the night before his first reaping, he hadn't been able to sleep. Neither had Abigail at first, and she'd cried herself sick. Will held her in his arms, stroking her hair, rocking her to sleep, and had feared that it would be the last time he'd ever get to do that. He'd given up on sleep in the end, and sat in the kitchen on a chair facing the window, planning to watch as dawn crept over the horizon in a few hours. His chance to do this was put on hold, because Beverly had barged into his house, throwing herself into his arms as he stood to greet her, letting out a sob into his chest.

“Will, I don't want to die, Will,” she'd babbled, and his shock had slipped into protective panic.

“Hey, you won't, Bev. It's really unlikely you'll get picked.”

“But what if I do? I'm scared of dying.”

They'd gone on like that for another few minutes, Bev mumbling about death sentences and arenas, and Will trying to comfort her. Suddenly, she'd looked up at him, eyes filled with tears, and said her most coherent sentence yet.

“It's not just that, Will. It's not just dying. It's dying alone,” she'd explained. “It's one thing to die in there. But it's another thing entirely to die surrounded by strangers.”

Will had tilted his chin up defiantly at those words, surprised at how much they'd resonated with him, and stared her down. “Then I'll volunteer if you get reaped,” he vowed. “We'll die together, or both survive.”

“There can't be two survivors in there.”

“There would be. I'd figure out a way for us to both get out, or make a deal with President Verger, or something, Bev. I wouldn't ever let you enter that arena alone. I promise.”

Her face had crumpled and she'd hugged him again, clutching him so tight he'd thought he was going to suffocate. He hadn't cared about that, though, because he loved her, and he meant it. Beverly Katz didn't deserve to die alone. His Beverly. His best friend. And she was standing on the stage in front of him, not long away from entering an arena that meant almost imminent death.

He had been much younger then. So naive. Of course there couldn't be two survivors, there was absolutely no way they could both leave the arena alive. He wouldn't find a way for them to both get out. He wouldn't be able to make a deal with President Verger. But…

Will had made her a promise, much like he had to Abigail, a careless mistake that had been broken within hours. This one he could keep.

He knew what he had to do.

“I volunteer!” he shouted, darting through the rapidly parting crowd to push in front of the small mousy boy making his way to the stage.

“We actually have to ask for volunteers first...” Freddie Lounds trailed off awkwardly. “Still, it's too late for that, I suppose. You'd better come up here, then.”

Ignoring Abigail's agonised wail, he stepped up next to Bev, and didn't look at her, instead glancing at the ocean of faces below him, the majority of which were shocked, and a few looking bitter. Will supposed he had taken away the chance to enter the Games from a few eighteen year olds.

“What's your name?” he heard Freddie say.

“Will Graham,” he answered, and his voice sounded distant, like he was hearing it from underwater, muffled by the blood roaring in his ears.

“Ah. Abigail Graham was your sister, I presume? And Beverly here is your, what? Your girlfriend? Did you ask her to volunteer if your sister was reaped?” she probed.

“No,” he said, and he would've snapped at her if he weren't in such shock at the moment. “No I didn't ask her to volunteer. And she's not my girlfriend. She's my friend.”

“Friends,” she repeated, sounding sceptical. Well, at least now Will already knew the kind of story they'd try to spin in the Capitol about them. The star-crossed lovers from District 4. A beautiful love story for the Capitol to covet and destroy.

She didn't try to ask them anymore questions, and before he knew it, the mayor had stood up and read the Treaty of Treason, and gestured for Will and Beverly to shake hands. Will turned to look at her, but she didn't meet his eye, just kept her head down, and Will realised that in all the time they'd known each other, they had never once shaken hands. There hadn't been need to.

He didn't like it.

It was too... formal. He and Bev weren't formal. They were best friends, practically siblings. And now she wouldn't even look at him.

After the anthem of Panem finished playing, they were marched inside the Justice Building, and ushered off to different rooms. Will sat on a plush sofa while he waited, eyes flicking around the room. It was ridiculously extravagant- the sofa he was sat on was deep red and made of some undoubtedly expensive material, and so were the other chairs. He was going to absolutely despise the Capitol if it was anything like this. How was it fair that they got to be rich and healthy while Will personally knew at least a dozen people who had starved to death? District 4 was one of the richer districts, sure, but compared to the Capitol they had nothing.

Was that true? Didn't family count for something? His certainly did, as they crept into the room, movements slow with sorrow. Will's chest swelled with sadness in equal measure, straining against his ribcage.

“Hey,” he managed, swallowing.

Abigail burst into tears, jumping onto the sofa next to him and throwing her arms around him. His mother joined them on his other side, pulling Will against her chest and clinging to him. He could tell that she didn't want to cry, at least not the way that Abigail was, but he could feel a wet patch on his head as her tears fell.

“My boy,” she said, her voice thick and choked up.

Will didn't want to cry either, he *didn't*. But hey, he'd already done that today.

“Mom,” he whispered, as a sob fought it's way out from his throat and he clutched at his mother's dress. He was shaking. He was *scared*.

It felt as if he let them hold him for *hours*, while tears forced their way from his eyes and he hung onto what little family he had with all the strength he could muster. His little sister and his mother. Some of the most important people in the world to him. He was about to lose them forever, was about to travel miles away to a place where people didn't *really* care about each other, not the way they did in the Districts, and he was never going to see them again. He could physically feel it, a phantom crushing of his heart, as he informed his mother the fishermen from the river might help them out if times got hard.

His mother nodded, obviously trying to be strong, but Abigail's weeping was ceaseless.

“I don't want you to go, Will,” she cried.

“I know, I know,” he said, desperately trying to comfort her.

“You promised.”

Will's heart dropped.

He *had* promised. He had been so sure. Or at least, he'd felt sure when he was talking to Abigail, and yet here he was.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

“I forgive you,” she finally replied after a long pause, voice trembling as she swallowed, a sudden rush of determination making itself clear in her expression. “But you have to promise me something else. And keep this one.”

“What is it?” he asked, but in truth, he already knew what it would be.

“Win.”

“I'll do my best.”

At that, she inhaled, shaky, and delved her hand into her pocket to retrieve something. When she opened her fist, he saw that a small bluebell rested there. It was slightly crushed and creased, battered from its journey in her dress, but the wave of pure emotion that hit him was almost paralysing.

“I know you don't have a token, so...” She swallowed, gesturing for him to take it. “Have this. To remember me by.”

He gazed at her in awe, his beautiful unstoppable little sister, and didn't even attempt to prevent the tears from gathering in his eyes. Through the blur, he watched as his mother removed the locket from around her neck, opening it and taking out the picture it held, and handing it to him, now empty. There were no words, and Will understood. For the flower. He smiled up at her.

And then a Peacekeeper was at the door, motioning for them to leave, and Will felt panic starting to set in.

“I love you,” he uttered to their retreating backs, suddenly realising that this was it, this could really be goodbye.

They said it back, and then they were gone. The door shut behind them. Will choked back more tears.

Thankfully, the next person to come through the door wasn't someone Will was ashamed of crying in front of. Bev's mother was already tear-stained and heartbroken, and she broke into fresh cries at the sight of him, gathering him up in her arms and kissing his head. Will hugged her back, now understanding that he wanted to hang onto anything and everything familiar, things that would remind him of home, because this could truly be the end. He could be about to lose everything, including his life.

“Just promise me something,” she begged once it was time for her to go. Yet another promise he would end up breaking, most likely.

“Anything,” he swore.

“Keep her safe. Just try to find a way, please. Find a way to get both of you out of there.”

And then she left.

Marissa came after that, crying nearly as much as Abigail. She held his hands and thanked him for the time he'd helped her with her homework last summer. He'd shut his eyes against the wave of despair threatening to overcome him. Then, it was a few boys from his class that came in to wish him luck. One of them apologised never giving back a pen he borrowed six years ago, and Will laughed so hard he almost started crying all over again. He felt hysterical and hyper-alert, everything was so precious and fleeting and he hadn't realised how much he loved all of it, the crispness of morning air and the blue fade of the sea on the horizon. It was his *life*, and he hadn't appreciated it the way he should.

Everything that made him who he was. It would all be gone.

All these people, all these visitors… they were a reminder of all he was about to lose. It was a kindness in the Capitol's eyes, that they were permitted these goodbyes, but it was also a torture in disguise. A tiny inkling of hope to keep them walking and talking during the pre-

Games period, before half of them were brutally murdered ten minutes after the Games started.

The door creaked again, the welcome of his last visitor.

This time, it was a pretty girl from the year above. He recognised her from around school, she was sunny and kind and Will had always liked her. She admitted that she'd walked in just to tell him that she'd been planning to ask him out soon, with a bashful smile and sad look in her eyes. “It's a shame,” she whispered, tone bittersweet, and Will swore to her that if he won the Games and she was still single, then they'd definitely do something about it. She smiled.

“Molly,” she said. “I'm Molly.”

Time went in a blur from then on, and before Will knew it, he was sitting in a car next to Beverly on his way to the train station, fist clenched so tight around the locket, now blessed with a bluebell in its depths, that his fingernails were making indentations in his palms. He would miss this all so dearly. He'd had his fair share of misfortune here, but it was still *his*. All of this had been his. And it was being stolen from him. The worst part was that the Capitol got off on it, were obsessed with the idea of taking and taking until they were drunk on the power of it. Taking from children. It made them feel special, and he had to lose his life because of it.

He must've been sniffling, because Bev's hand sneaked down and grabbed his. She didn't look at him, but it was enough. After what seemed like hours of pictures and flashing cameras at the station, they were finally herded onto the train, and it sped away. Away from his home, and away from his family.

Chapter End Notes

comments and/or kudos would be greatly appreciated. thanks for reading !

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of course, one member of his family was actually here with him, and said family member approached him as soon as they were herded off to their separate chambers by Freddie Lounds. Will had just sunk onto the bed, exhausted, before the door was thrown open and Bev came storming in. Started, he hastily tripped to his feet.

“Will Graham, what the *hell* were you thinking? *Volunteering?* That is by far the *worst* idea you've ever had, and I was there when you tried to gut a fish with a rock!”

“It was a sharp rock!” he defended. “It was shaped like a knife!”

“*Will!”*

“Bev, I *wasn't* thinking, that was the problem.”

“Goddamn *right* you weren't thinking!”

“I made you a promise!” Will suddenly found himself yelling, and it shocked Bev into silence. It shocked him, too. Quieter, his voice came again, unbidden. “I promised you, the night before our first reaping, that I would never let you do this alone. I *promised* you.”

“Will, we were stupid kids then,” Bev said, but it was subdued, spoken as a sigh.

“And we're stupid kids now.”

She crumbled at this, and practically fell against him, while his arms went up to hold her on instinct. She didn't cry, and neither did he- they'd both done enough crying at the Justice Building, and he honestly didn't know if they had enough water in left their bodies to do it all over again.

“Thank you,” he murmured against her hair. “I know I didn't ask you to, but thank you for volunteering for Abigail.”

“I wouldn't have let her go in there,” she replied, her voice tight and bordering on angry. “She's too young. I know it would be easier for you to lose me, anyway-”

“Don't,” he said sharply, and pushed her away from his chest, keeping her at shoulder length so he could look her in the eye. He didn't like eye contact with most people, but for Bev, he could make an exception. Especially now. “Don't say that. It wouldn't be harder, but don't you dare say that it would be easier.”

“So you don't... regret this?” she wondered hesitantly.

“What? Volunteering with you? No. It was a hard decision and I'm scared of dying, but I don't regret this. Not at all,” he told her. “You're my best friend.”

“And you're mine.”

Amongst all this chaos, the promise of death and inevitability of pain, with nothing in the world to smile about, he did. There was a peace that came when Bev looked at him, her eyes a soothe to whatever ills he experienced. She was like a soft breeze on a summer's day, a sweet, gasping relief. Enough to still the racing of his heart and his thoughts. Yes, he would be arriving in the jaws of certain death in a short few hours, but he wouldn't be alone.

“Are you going to bring a token?” she asked, and he swallowed, remembering Abigail's gift.

“A flower. From Abigail,” he answered tightly, emotion restraining his voice, and Bev nodded in understanding, knowing not to push. “Is yours the necklace?”

“Yeah,” she whispered, pulling out the necklace from under her shirt. It was a chain with a tiny wooden charm hanging on the end, and she hadn't taken it off for years. Her father had seen something beautiful once, that had floated out at sea, and whittled it for her. He'd called it a chrysanthemum. He'd said it was small and delicate and precious, with endless meaning, and reminded him of her. It was the only gift she had from him.

When dinner finally came Will was caught up in a wave of wild gratitude and hunger, realising suddenly that all he'd eaten today was bread and cheese, and it was all that had carried him through the chaos of the reaping. In the dining car, they came across Jack Crawford, hunched over the table before them. He gave them a nod of acknowledgement as they sat down, but it was the only interaction they shared throughout dinner.

The food was the best thing Will had ever tasted, so he understood why. Three different courses, all stuffed with rich, filling food that Will and Bev scoffed down, rarely having had the luxury of a good meal. Still, the sheer amount of cuisine on the table was ridiculous- it was far too much for four people to eat. He supposed food was taken for granted in the Capitol. They didn't eat to live. It was an everyday thing, for them.

The thought made the meal go down a little bitterly, and it didn't help that Will knew exactly what would be following it. District 4 was not the only player in these Games, and as they were sat in front of a large television screen, the extent of that truth, and the danger of it, became increasingly obvious.

“Chiyoh.”

It was just the one name that was called for the female District 1 tribute, which was a little unusual, but they got to write their own names, so not impossible. A tall and skinny girl was gracefully walking to the stage, looking like she was long past age eighteen, and her mouth was curved with a smile, which gave him cause to suspect that she'd been planning to volunteer anyway, especially seeing as no other voices chased the calling of her name. The boy's name was called next, but the tiny person it belonged to was barely on stage for thirty seconds before a smooth voice came from the crowd.

“I volunteer.”

An equally tall boy made his way to the escort's other side, and calmly introduced himself as Hannibal Lecter to the crowd, and even with a nod to the cameras. Will was surprisingly struck by him. His hair was shining in the sun and his skin complemented it beautifully, an expanse of tan caramel. The downward pout to his lips was illustrated by some great, tragic joy, as though all the secrets of the world were painted upon them. Despite his beauty, though, it was immediately obvious that he was dangerous. Despite being quite slender, the boy simply had that way about him; the way he held himself, the way he spoke, it made him seem deadly. It was the same for the girl. Will couldn't say he was surprised, though- District 1 had never failed to produce Career Tributes.

An intimidating boy by the name of “Tobias Budge” volunteered from District 2 next, closely followed by the Boyle siblings both being reaped from District 3. Then it was him and Beverly. Abigail appeared even tinier than she was in real life, little and skinny and frightened. Bev looked brave for stepping up, mysterious for her lack of words spoken to Freddie. She was short, but striking. People would remember her. For now, she looked like a Career Tribute.

Will, on the other hand… did not give off the same impression.

He had fresh tears on his face and elected personal details willingly. He held no allure, no mystery. He was just another scared tribute, bound to be lost amongst the masses, forgotten.

He hated himself for it.

Finally, the screen switched to District 5, and so on. There were so many tributes that Will couldn't remember them all, and a few stood out to him. A small chubby boy was called from District 7, a taller boy from District 10 who carried himself like an animal volunteered, and a girl with ginger hair from District 12, who left behind several screaming boys when she was picked.

“Well, well,” Freddie Lounds said as the screen shut off. “Lots of volunteers from outlying Districts this year. That Randall Tier from District 10, Eldon Stammets from District 11, and even a District 12 volunteer! I must say, Matthew Brown did look like a threat...”

“Freddie,” Jack warned, and Will and Bev almost jumped, hearing him speak for the first time in person. His voice was less harsh than it appeared in interviews, and much more open than Will had imagined. It held the same level quality that he had expected, however. “If you don't mind, I'd like to talk actual tactics with these two.”

She gave a huff, and turned her back on them, stalking off, the swing of her hair enough to draw Will's attention as she left. When he turned back, Jack was staring at him, an eyebrow raised. His expression was detached, but it wasn't cold. Will didn't imagine that his job was easy, knowing every year that the fate of two young lives rested in his hands, and the only way to save them was to force them into the murky world of violence.

“As you can see, I'm probably going to be more helpful to you than she is,” he remarked scathingly. “Now, tell me. Have either of you been trained?”

“No,” they both answered miserably.

“Then I think your best play is to tone it down as much as possible. You haven't been trained, so let the Capitol know that. Get One's and Two's in your training scores. Nobody will see you as a threat. You might not be well trained, but you can use the element of surprise to your advantage.”

“I... Think we can do that?” Will replied hesitantly, a little taken aback at Jack's sudden desire to talk.

Jack leant forward toward them, balancing his elbows on his knees, and broke into a string of more advice, not just about how to survive in the arena, but how to present themselves to the Capitol. It was very informative, but Will almost felt resistant to it. He knew it was *helpful*, but… it wasn't going to *work*. Not for him. He had already messed it up.

None of this was *real*, it was like some elaborate dream he was having the night before the reaping; an over-complicated nightmare. Any minute now he'd wake up, sweat on his brow, Abigail just metres away. Everything would happen the same as it had, except this time, Abigail wouldn't get reaped. Then he and Beverly wouldn't volunteer. *Things will be okay*, he thought, pressing the edge of his nails against the sensitive pale of the skin on his arm.

But he didn't wake up.

This was reality.

Their discussion was soon interrupted by the train slowing to a stop, and Will realised he had lost track of time, not noticing as they'd sped throughout the Districts and arrived at the Capitol, the beginning of the end. This place was the last he would see of Panem before his untimely death, since the arena certainly didn't count as any real destination. His heart leapt into his throat as he began to hear excited yells from outside, and he and Bev crept towards the window, to see the tall, shining buildings and faces of people from the Capitol, decked out in their bright clothes and colourful wigs.

They were both transfixed.

Now this… *this* was a dream. It was *stunning*. Skyscrapers really *did* touch the sky, stretching up through the clouds, towering above them all. The setting sun glittering off the windows of the buildings looked like rain, was a blur of brightness that blended together in a storm of industrial modernism. District 4 looked *primitive* compared to this. It sort of made sense, growing up here, sheltered, indoctrinated, that they ended up hating the Districts, or at least being ignorant to them. He didn't forgive them for it, but now, he got it. For a second, as he stepped out off the train and into the open, it felt like nothing else mattered, drawn into the lie like all the rest of them, pulled helplessly into the bright illusion of the rich.

Oh, if only.

By the time they were led to the Training Center, he was in a complete daze, struck dumb by the tall ceilings and decorated walls, stunned silent by the noise and the people and the colours. But when they finally reached the floor for District 4, it hit him how tired he was.

Freddie pointed out their rooms with a polite smile, and Will and Bev followed her directions, desperate at this point for any sort of isolation, some breathing room away from the shocking fluorescence of riches, of all the things they never had. Clinging onto one another on the silken sheets of Will's bed was all they could do not to feel utterly lost.

“I miss Abigail,” Will whispered into the dark, and Bev made a noise of something akin to a sob. “I miss my mom. I miss your mom. I miss everyone.”

“So do I.”

“I want to go home.”

Beverly started crying, then, and so did Will. He let out the great heaving sobs that he'd been wanting to for hours, and didn't bother to try to dry his tears, burying them into the mess of Bev's hair, one hand clutched tight around the locket in the privacy of his pocket. It seemed like a lifetime ago that they had sat on the side of the river and pretended everything would be fine, when in reality, it was only that very morning. It felt like forever since he'd seen his baby sister, and made false promises right to her face.

Bev clutched his free hand under the covers and pressed her forehead against his shoulder, and Will was grateful for the grounding presence of familiarity she gave him as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

i love beverly katz so much and i'm STILL not over her death so i'm afraid i'm subjecting everyone to her as a major character in this series

Chapter 4

Nobody came to wake them up. They eventually woke more or less simultaneously, later than they had been allowed to for years. It was strange, being given free reign to wake up whenever they wanted, without any obligations, chores, or responsibilities they had to fulfil to simply survive. It still seemed fairly early, though- a lifetime of waking at the crack of dawn had trained them not to sleep in too late.

The atmosphere at the breakfast table was quiet, Jack sitting there alone, giving them a polite nod as they sat down. Jack always seemed distant with them- the complete opposite of Freddie. He'd told them what they needed to do to survive, but except for that, he wasn't making any more efforts to bond with them apart from performing the expected niceties. Will supposed that he tried not to get too close to any tributes, seeing as they might die anyway. He understood that, and didn't feel offended by Jack's lack of personal interest in them. He was more alike to them than Freddie after all, and Will already preferred him for this.

When Freddie arrived the mood instantly changed, frosting over like water during winter, and she must've decidedly forgotten about anything that had happened the day before because she included Jack in the conversation, despite the obvious hostility he was radiating towards her. Today would be the Tribute Parade, she told them. They were to meet their stylists within the hour.

For the past few years, District 4 tributes had been dressed by Alana Bloom and Margot Verger, and they were both grateful for this. They were some of the few stylists that actually knew the definition of the word subtle. There was a lot of shock about the President's sister becoming a simple stylist for District 4, but when asked about it, Margot just said that despite her riches, she actually wanted to contribute towards the Hunger Games, which had just made her even more beloved to the Capitol and further estranged from the Districts. Will thought that there was something more to it, however, something behind her soft eyes and barely-there smile. Something haunted and sad.

As the time came for them to meet, they were taken down the elevator and herded through so many corridors that Will was sure that he'd never find his way around. It didn't matter. He wouldn't be here for long, anyway, would soon be bloodied and dying at some mystery location, fighting fruitlessly for his life.

“Hi,” came a sudden voice as they made their way across the Remake Center, as he was accosted by a smiling man in a lab coat. “I'm Brian Zeller. Will Graham, I assume?”

It was surprising how normal he looked, but Will didn't comment on it, just allowed himself to be led into a bustling room filled with all sorts of beauty utensils, some of which were so unknown to him they were almost frightening. There wasn't much he could do to protest, so he let himself be hosed down and readied for Alana. Zeller finally grabbed a pair of scissors and held them up to Will's hair, squinting as he did so. Will held his breath, expecting the worst, but Zeller paused.

“I think we'll leave the hair. It's endearing,” he remarked, inspecting Will. Within minutes, he and his company were gone, whisked from the room as fast as they had got there.

It was surprisingly more uncomfortable to sit there alone than it was to be poked and prodded like a specimen. Being alone made him… think of things. Such as his untimely death. It made him relieved when there was movement at the door, a shift. Alana was pretty and soft-spoken, Will knew this. She had always come across as kind, and Will had even had a crush on her when he was younger, looking forward to the interviews she took part in about her design choices. Still, meeting her now was a little bit daunting.

“Will Graham,” she greeted. “I'm Alana Bloom. It's nice to meet you.”

“Hi,” he muttered, sulky, and she did nothing but tilt her head at him, weighing him with her eyes.

It was silent for a minute, the quiet a prickling discomfort between them, threading its way through the air, before Will could no longer hold his tongue, curiosity getting the better of him.

“What am I going to be wearing?”

The awkward tranquillity snapped, easing his nervous energy. Alana was smiling, a kind curl of her lip that had Will helpless to do anything but return it, mouth moving unwillingly to mirror hers. She'd had this effect when on television, but he had never truly expected it to extend to real life. It was a sweet comfort that it did, making that bitter sting when he thought about the Games a little less hard to swallow.

“Don't worry, nothing too extravagant. I'm toning it down even further this year, I think you and Beverly need that approach.”

“Why's that?”

“I don't think I'm at liberty to say.”

“Because we're untrained,” he answered for her. “I don't know anything about fashion, and I won't claim to, but the reason you're doing something different this year is because me and Bev are untrained. We're not like the other tributes from Four.”

“How very perceptive of you, Will. You're right. But I swear to you, everything that Margot and I are doing is to make sure you and Beverly get through the Games.” She looked at him attentively, calculating his reactions to what she had said. Perhaps he was foolish, but he believed her.

“Just promise me that I'll get to wear a shirt.”

Alana laughed a little, but nodded, “I promise.”

She was true to her word.

After meeting up with Beverly and her prep team and stylist, they made their way down to the ground floor of the Remake Center. He was dressed in a simple ensemble; a light-blue shirt made of soft material, similarly coloured slacks, and a small fishing net strung through the belt loops of his trousers, tied into a knot at the side. While moving, his clothes would give the impression of waves, rolling on the sea. *Like home*, he thought. It wasn't bright or flashy, but it wasn't completely dull either, which was perfect for Will. He didn't exactly *want* the people of the Capitol gawking at him and doting on him, but he needed sponsors. Alana and Margot had already won his trust with their clothing choices.

There were other tributes in pairs scattered across the room as they approached their chariot, watching as Margot and Alana talked in hushed voices about last-minute adjustments, and as Zeller and the guy from Bev's prep team gestured wildly to each other about the other tributes.

“Will they ever stop having the District 12 tributes naked?” Bev asked him, rolling her eyes at Matthew Brown and a girl Will simply remembered as 'Eva', stood completely bare, with only black powder for modesty.

Involuntary, Will laughed, and a few heads turned to look at him. A flush climbed his cheeks at the attention, realising that laughing was a strange thing to do when in a room filled with people that would undoubtedly try to kill him in a few days time. Bev looked back to Alana and Margot, her eyes narrowed and considering, and Will gave into the temptation to let his eyes flick around the room, scanning the tributes for threats. Eventually, his eyes came to rest on the boy from District 1, and was shocked to see that he was already staring back at him.

Hannibal Lecter, his mind supplied.

Will had always been very good at reading people, at getting inside their heads, but right now, Hannibal Lecter was utterly unreadable to him. The expression on his face as he looked at Will was indistinguishable, and he seemed to be ignoring what his fellow tribute and his stylist were saying to him. Will swallowed nervously, feeling as if he was being cross-examined for some reason, but lifted his chin defiantly, as if daring Lecter to do something. The way they were looking at each other was bizarre, but almost intimate, in a way, the world seeming to stop spinning below them. It was like he was being challenged.

Lecter tilted his head, keeping his eyes locked with Will's, and that was precisely when Will realised that they were making eye contact.

He *hated* eye contact. Save for Beverly, his mother and Abigail, Will rarely made eye contact with anyone, so he tore his gaze away from Lecter with surprising speed, pointing it at the ground and pretending that he couldn't still feel eyes on him. Blood rushing in his ears, he felt his heart throb with adrenaline for a few beats, a heady mix of anxiety and excitement encompassing him.

“Hannibal Lecter is staring at you,” Bev whispered to him, and he knew she was likely frowning over at the other boy.

“I *know*,” he hissed back.

“Is he sizing you up? Are you gonna be his first victim in the arena?”

His head snapped up and he glared at Beverly, horrified.

“Thanks for your comfort, Bev!”

She shrugged, grinning at him, and gave him a knock with her shoulder. A rumble of activity grew around them, and Will knew it was time for them to start. He allowed himself one more quick glance, and was chagrined to find that Lecter was still looking at him. What did he want? Surely Will wasn't all that interesting? He could be looking at Budge, the boy from District 2 who seemed as if he could snap someone's neck instantaneously, or Tier, the boy who Will could so easily equate to a wild animal because of his murderous stare, or even Franklyn Froideveaux, who while not very impressive, was obviously trying to get his attention from across the room. But no, instead, Lecter was gazing at Will.

Lecter's chariot pulled away a minute later, finally freeing Will from his scrutinising eyes. He let out a deep breath, feeling quite dizzy all of a sudden. He would be wary now, even more wary than he was before, of Hannibal Lecter. Whatever had just happened, whatever they had just shared, it was important, but Will didn't know why.

Putting it aside for later thought, he sighed and turned to face the front of the chariot, and let Alana fuss over his outfit, tugging at it and straightening the fabric.

“There we go,” she said with a flourish, and he almost fell as the chariot suddenly jolted forward.

“Remember to smile!” Margot shouted at them, and Will felt that it was mostly directed at him.

With one last jerk, they rode into the breathtaking city. He couldn't stop a real grin from spreading across his face at seeing the beauty of it all again, and clutched at the side of the chariot to prevent himself from falling as the people of the Capitol cheered and clapped for them. He looked at the television screen, and could see exactly what Alana and Margot had been trying to do.

His hair had been styled to look tousled on *purpose*, and with his clothes that brought out the colour of his eyes and happy grin, he looked boyish- charming, even. At sixteen, he was neither the oldest or youngest of the tributes, and children who were in the middle were often brushed over. Alana had drawn attention to him, decided to portray him as the cheeky and mischievous sixteen year old from District 4 who would become the unexpected victor. With a glance at Beverly, he could tell that Margot's approach with her had been the same. Instead of relying on clothes, their stylists had put their faith in them.

Realising this, Will forced himself to smile even wider, trying to look directly at people in the crowd. People in the other chariots were winking and blowing kisses, pandering to the Capitol and its flamboyance. But Will, ever stubborn, couldn't demean himself like that. Not quite. So he simply settled for smiling. District 1 were already the favourites, Lecter's godly face a prime feature in the Capitol's good graces, but District 4 got its fair amount of screen time, and enough people were cheering for them. It was good enough for him.

“Welcome everyone, to the seventy-fourth annual Hunger Games!” President Verger shouted into his microphone.

Will instantly hated him. He could see little resemblance between him and Margot- while he had only known her for a few minutes, she overall seemed quite kind. Her brother did not, however. Mason Verger was underwhelming. He was nasally and extravagant and *boring,* and Will was more than glad when it finally ended. After the official welcome in the City Circle, the chariots pulled into the Training Center with an uneven bump, and their prep teams hurried over to them immediately.

“That was perfect,” Margot gushed. “Just the impression we wanted to make!”

She and Alana shared a sly look, before they hurried Beverly and Will through a vaguely familiar maze of the corridors and up the elevator to the 4th floor. Just before they left, Will had the misfortune of catching Lecter's eyes again. He looked impressed.

“-completely not what I expected, everyone was very impressed!” Freddie praised over dinner, though Will had ignored most of what she was saying. “We might have to change your strategies, now, though.”

“I disagree,” said Jack. “If people like them enough, they won't care that they're untrained- everybody likes an underdog. Act charming for the Capitol, but come across as incompetent in front of the tributes. If you get a low training score, the tributes will assume that you really are incapable of defending yourself, but the Capitol will just feel sorry for you, seeing as they already like you so much.”

The conversation lingered on the subject of the Tribute Parade until they were finally made to sit and watch a replay of the opening ceremonies. Again, it was Hannibal Lecter that stood out to Will. He held his head high, smiling and waving graciously at the applauding crowds- it was almost as if he had been practising his whole life to be there. *Oh wait*, Will thought, *he **had***. It was a bitter reminder of how little a chance he and Bev had in the Games, and he couldn't even cheer up when he saw the positive reaction the Capitol had to them. Sponsors would only take them so far, they could just as easily be murdered by Careers as soon as they set foot in the arena.

“What are we gonna do, Will?” Bev asked as they lay next to each other that night. “We can't both come out of that arena.”

He realised that in all the chaos, he hadn't even thought about that.

“I don't know,” he mumbled guiltily, shutting his eyes.

She held his hand again, and he felt an overwhelming sense of dread overcome him as he fell asleep. His last thought, however, was about why Hannibal Lecter had been staring at him.

Chapter 5

Will dreamt of flashing cameras, screaming, and Lecter's dark eyes on him. Jerking awake as sunlight crept through the curtains, he could see Bev sleeping just as fitfully. He was glad to wake up, despite where he was and what he had to face today. It was an escape from the unsteady and unpredictable world of dreams, the horrors that his mind had waiting in store. The day offered its own personal brand of terror, however, in the form of Jack Crawford's preparations:

“I assume because of your closeness that I'll be coaching you together, but is there anything that either of you can do that will help you in the arena? Anything at all?”

“We can fish,” Bev offered. “Also, I climbed a tree once. A cat was stuck in it.”

“I'm glad you have time for humour, Beverly, but I don't. This is serious,” said Jack, and the solemnity in his tone was enough to bring back the fear, rising in Will's stomach like a tidal wave. Jack, of course, was completely correct. This was no time for jokes.

“I can't really do anything else apart from fish,” Will said, sobering.

“You're good at reading people, getting inside their heads,” Bev suggested, and Will felt shame ricochet through him. Empathy- how helpful.

“What good will that be?”

“You can find out what people's next moves are. See what they'll do next; if they'll attack you.”

“She's right,” Jack interjected. “It isn't exactly a great way to stay alive, but it'll help. And you, Beverly? Got any special skills?”

“I can hunt, I guess. Not very well, but I know how to be quiet... I could sneak up on a few of them?” She sounded hesitant, and Will understood. To talk about their skills was one thing, but to actually consider how they could kill the other tributes was... disconcerting, to say the least. It was unreal, like an incredibly lucid dream that Will kept telling himself he would wake up from.

“Remember, don't show too much of your ability in front of the other tributes. You'll need to train, of course, just keep in mind that the rest of them are there,” Jack reminded, glancing at the clock. With one last look of exasperation between them, he added, “I'm not even going to ask you to stay apart.”

As they stood in a circle with the other tributes, heart hammering in their chests, one quick glance up told Will what he needed to know. Lecter wasn't looking at him. Not today. Huh. A couple of the others were, however. He saw Matthew Brown glancing at him from the corner of his eye, and caught Eldon Stammets at it, too. He didn't take it personally- everybody was

weighing each other up today, seeing who was a threat, and who they'd want as an ally. He didn't want any allies. He had Beverly. That was enough.

“We'll cover more ground if we split up,” she said as the group of tributes began to scatter throughout the room. “And then teach each other the stuff we know in the arena.”

Will nodded in agreement, and after a pause of deliberation, made his way over to the knife-throwing station, which was thankfully quite empty. The trainer was already working with someone else- Franklyn, if Will had remembered right, but he didn't want the trainer. Just because he had to *act* incompetent, it didn't mean that he had to feel it. He ran his hand over the handle of one of the knives, feeling the cold weight below his palm, hearing nothing but his own heartbeat. There was nothing wrong with trying, surely?

Perhaps his submitting to his pride was a mistake, since he'd had no experience with this particular skill. After a few failed attempts at hitting the target, he heard a smooth, heavily accented voice come from behind him.

“Do you need any help with that?”

He spun around, to look directly at Hannibal Lecter, who was smiling cautiously at him.

“What?”

“I said, do you-”

“I know what you said,” Will snapped. “I meant why.”

“Excuse me?” Lecter asked.

“Why would you help me?” he questioned, feeling as if he were teetering on the edge of a very steep cliff, a hairsbreadth away from danger.

“Why wouldn't I?”

He scowled, already feeling annoyance towards the other boy. “Because you're going to try to kill me in a few days, but now you're trying to help train me. Because I could get better than you, and end up killing you. Because no tribute would ever help someone else from another district. Why *would* you?”

“Oh, Will,” Lecter huffed, with a hollow laugh. “Do you really think I would help you if I ever thought you could ever stand a chance against me?”

Will was taken aback by the honesty and coldness of the statement, and swallowed, his throat suddenly feeling dry. The air sparked with tension between them, crackling and sizzling like a building fire, inescapable, and it made Will feel hot all over. Lecter's eyes seemed to have immeasurable depths, dark and endless, welling with ink.

“Why did you call me that?”

“That's your name, isn't it?”

“Graham isn't hard to say, either, you know. I don't think we're quite on a first name basis yet- what's with the familiarity? Do you want something from me?”

“You're very observant, aren't you?” Lecter asked, sounding *smug*, of all things. “But also presumptuous. I don't see any use in being so standoffish. Names are nothing but false identity, if you ask me. Nothing but a simple word. There isn't anything dangerous about using them.”

“I don't know about you, but I want to keep things as impersonal as possible in the arena,” Will rebuffed, unable to remove himself from the absurdity of the conversation, endlessly drawn in. Hannibal Lecter was already the most ridiculous creature he'd ever met, and Will felt drunk off it.

“*I* don't,” Lecter replied, and it came out almost amused. “Would you like my help or not?”

Will gazed at him, considering. What was the harm in letting him help, really? Lecter obviously didn't think him very competent already, so he wasn't technically betraying Jack's orders. And he really could do with the help. Finally, he sighed, and nodded at the boy, attempting to keep his reply short and distant, despite the unexpected rush of want for closeness.

“Yes please.”

Lecter smirked coldly, satisfied, and his hands came to Will's arms, readying to manoeuvre him round again to face the target. Will's breath hitched at the sudden and firm touch, but didn't let his expression shift to betray any surprise, simply let his hand fall on Lecter's wrist before he could be turned. Showing vulnerability here felt like a risk.

“You never did say why you're helping me.”

“Think of it as an act of friendship,” Lecter divulged, and Will stiffened.

“There are no *friends* in the arena,” he spat.

“Really? Because you seem fairly close to Miss Katz over there,” Lecter retaliated, and Will's eyes shot straight to the knot-tying station, where Bev went on with her activity, unaware of the conversation happening across the room.

“That's different. We grew up together.”

“Perhaps. But why would you be so against having one more friend?”

“Look, Lecter, I don't want to be rude, but... I *can't*. I can't have another friend in the arena. I can only afford to care about one other person in there, and that's Beverly. Surely that's the unspoken rule of the Games: don't get attached. Not to anyone.”

“Would you not say you're attached to Beverly?”

“It's *different*.”

“Is it? Because which one of you is going to die? Do you think she'll have to kill you? Or will you have to kill her?”

It stunned Will into silence. Not Jack, Alana, Margot, or even *Freddie* had had the gall to say it. They all knew it was true, of course, and so did Bev and Will. Hearing it out loud was harder, though, sending a shiver of pained terror down his spine. Lecter took his silence as the opportunity to shift him to face the target, instructing him to root his feet and hold his weight in his stomach, hands trailing around Will's waist as he did.

“Hm. You haven't been trained, correct?”

“Um, yeah.”

“Well, you're from District Four, so I assume you've fished before. You have strong upper arm strength, so it's just your technique we need to work on.”

“I'm strong?" Will asked in confusion.

He heard Lecter chuckle, hands tightening around his waist ever-so-slightly.

“Yes. Very strong. How long have you been fishing for?”

“For about as long as I can remember. My father taught me when I was really young, before...” He caught himself. Why had he been about to tell Lecter about his *father?* Hadn't he just said that he'd wanted to keep things impersonal? There was something about this boy, this mystery in a person suit, that drew words from him like a puppet on strings.

“Before what?”

“Doesn't matter,” he mumbled quickly.

Lecter didn't say anything for a few seconds, clearly choosing to tiptoe around Will rather than push, because he swiftly moved on to teaching him about throwing techniques. He stood close, his figure a mere inch behind, almost pressed up against him, but Will did his best to ignore it. The second knife he threw landed just on the edge of the target, and he grinned. As he prepared to throw his third knife, Lecter grew ever closer, so that Will could almost feel his breath on his ear. He inhaled sharply, strangely, making Will's skin prickle. He had an odd notion that…

“Did you just *smell* me?”

“Difficult to avoid,” was his answer, and Will would've asked him what the *hell* he thought he was doing if he weren't interrupted. “I was very impressed by your performance last night, Will,” Lecter whispered.

“Performance?”

Lecter chuckled again, and his next words were nearly teasing.

“Oh, come on. You and I both know that's what it was. You knew exactly what your stylists were aiming for, and you played up to it.”

“I guess?”

“You seem to be very good at understanding people.”

Oh.

Lecter knew.

“They told me,” he babbled, unbidden, ridiculous, panicked. “Alana, she told me what she was aiming for, and I, I just did what she said.”

“Still.” Lecter didn't sound convinced. “You played the part very well.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, feeling ashamed at his slowness. Lecter seemed to be neutralising everything in the air around him, making him feel hazy with it all. This wasn't him. With a sudden surge of bravery, he felt words dance on his tongue, excited at finally having their turn to watch Lecter squirm. “I didn't even realise you saw me.”

“Really.” It wasn't a question. It hadn't had the intended effect- Lecter sounded like he was about to laugh, and guided Will's hand as he moved to throw his next knife.

“Really,” Will affirmed, mind tripping over memories of his dark eyes and intense stare, and the wild adrenaline he'd felt at it.

Lecter didn't respond, and Will only heard an amused exhale.

“Bring your arm back, and swing,” he murmured a minute later, “feel where you want the knife to go. See it, in your mind. Line up the shot, and throw.”

It sounded like a load of nonsense, really, but it didn't take too long for him to hit the centre of the target, and he hastily looked around to check if anybody else saw. Thankfully, they hadn't. He stepped away from Lecter's strange, and frankly, intoxicating proximity, and beckoned him over to another station, where luckily, the trainer was also busy. Lecter, for the first time since Will had met him, appeared confused.

“Why are we here?” he asked.

“I'm showing you how to make a fishing lure,” Will explained simply, and knelt in front of the materials.

“Why?”

“Because I don't like owing people anything.”

“You don't owe me-”

“Maybe not. But it feels like I do. Now sit down and let me teach you.”

Despite looking surprised at Will's sudden burst of authority, Lecter obliged, sitting down and watching attentively as Will made a lure. He made Lecter try it afterwards, directing his hands as he tied a knot. His skin was smooth and warm; his hands steady. Will didn't want to let go. There was a growing pit of guilt in his stomach at the thoughts, that he carelessly tried to shake away, throwing his gaze to the elevated seats above them.

“The Gamemakers are watching us,” he murmured to Lecter, still leading his hands. He supposed it wasn't surprising- two tributes from different districts helping each other was completely unheard of.

“They've been watching us since I first approached you,” Lecter replied, and Will huffed, because of *course* they had been.

“You didn't say anything.”

“Why would I?”

“Asshole.”

Lecter laughed; a soft, melodic laugh, a *real* laugh, and Will couldn't decide whether it fit with his personality or not. He seemed to alternate between gentleness and aloofness, unable to choose an exterior to present to Will. He was quite the puzzle, and Will had to stop himself from launching into legions of more questions. Lecter soon finished his lure and held it up for him to see, to which Will nodded approvingly.

“Not bad,” he said. “For a first try.”

Laughing again, Lecter handed him the lure and rose to his feet, extending a hand for him to grab. It only took a second for Will to decide that he wanted to touch those hands again, so he let himself be pulled up, breath stopping entirely as the momentum of it made him sway against Lecter, moving dauntingly close to the solid form of his body.

“Thanks,” Will said, righting himself hastily, gesturing to the knife-throwing station, feeling so suddenly awkward about it all. “Thanks for teaching me that.”

“Thank you too, Will, for teaching me how to make lures,” Lecter responded, so *earnest*, and Will honestly wasn't one to blush, but right now, he wasn't far off.

“I know you don't actually need to know,” he declared, feeling as if he had to push past the sincerity. “I just did it because I-”

“You felt like you owed me, yes. I understand. But I appreciate it nonetheless.”

Lecter gave Will a wide smile, honest and charming, and Will managed one in return, although it was much weaker in comparison. Head swimming, he allowed Lecter a polite nod before turning on his heel and seeking clearer air, lonelier air. Lecter really was quite disarming. Will had never felt so small, yet so scrutinised all at once. It was exhausting, and maybe that was why sleep came easier that night. Half-asleep, he recounted the day's events to Bev, and most significantly, his interaction with Hannibal Lecter.

“Maybe he's trying to sabotage you,” she suggested. Will thought of his steady hands and black eyes, the brush of his touch, slight of his breath. His laugh.

“Maybe.”

Predictably, Lecter invaded his dreams.

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“So, Will,” Jack began at breakfast, breaking the stony silence at the table. “Is there any point in giving you advice, or do you just not care?”

“What? What are you talking about?” Will questioned. Jack simply shook his head, clearly annoyed. “I *took* your advice! *All* of it!”

“Hannibal Lecter, Will.”

“What about him?”

“He wants you as his ally. Told his mentor. Bedelia let me know last night, after you two went to bed. *Hannibal Lecter*, Will! The Career Tribute from District One! You must've done *something* right yesterday.”

“I... I didn't do anything,” he told Jack truthfully. “I mean we talked, but briefly. Skill-wise, I don't see how I could impress him. *Honestly*, I don't.”

Mind reeling, he rode the elevator down to the Training Center with the resolution to confront Lecter, confusion thick in his head. After one short conversation, filled with nothing but veiled tension and uncomfortable pauses, Lecter wanted *him* as an ally. Will. Who could do nothing but fish and think well. What could Will possibly have that he wanted? What could he have done that warranted *this*?

“Lecter, can I have a word?” he requested, making his way over to him with breathless interest, and two heads turned to look at him. One of them was Lecter, who smiled in sweet surprise when he saw Will, and the other was the girl from District 1. Her name was Chiyoh, if he remembered correctly. Her gaze was *scathing*. She looked at him like he was inferior to them, as if he wasn't even worthy to be in Lecter's presence. *Ouch*. Ignoring her, he looked imploringly at the other boy, who nodded, and motioned for Will to come to the side with him.

“Can I do something for you, Will?”

“Yes. Tell me, why the *hell* did you ask for me as an ally?” he demanded.

Lecter raised his eyebrows at Will's forwardness. “I didn't ask for you. Dr Du Maurier simply asked me who I'd want- hypothetically. And I told her the truth.”

“So you said you wanted *me* as an ally? *Why?”*

“May I ask why you're so opposed to the idea?” Lecter probed.

“I'm not- it's not... It's not *you*. Don't take it personally. This is about me and Bev,” he explained, falling over himself to get the words out. “I told you, I can't afford to worry about anyone else in there.”

“I understand,” Lecter said with a nod of acknowledgement. “I apologise if I overstepped my bounds. At the time I only believed I was answering a question. I didn't expect Dr Du Maurier to talk to Jack Crawford about my answer, and for that, I'm sorry.”

Will sighed, and all was forgiven. It itched at his brain, though, now only a small spark of curiosity but one that he knew would only grow, would become immense until it occupied his every waking thought. Unable to deny himself, he asked.

“But.. why *me?”*

A beat.

“I find you... intriguing,” Lecter admitted.

Will paused, a little stumped by his response.

“Well,” he started, resenting the words that were about to leave his mouth, “I'm afraid the feeling isn't mutual. I don't find you that interesting.”

“You will.”

Lecter was wrong, because he *already* found him interesting. He wanted more than anything to accept Lecter's offer, to get to know him better- he was utterly captivating, and Will wanted to climb inside his head, bathe in all the delights of his mind. But he couldn't do that. Beverly was his priority, and he had to remember that. It was why he'd been so rude. God, it was so flattering that Lecter found him intriguing, but he just couldn't risk it. He had to distance himself as much as possible.

But what he wouldn't give for Lecter's eyes and hands on him again.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey, come on, Will,” Bev comforted, “it'll be alright.”

They were sat waiting for their turn in the private sessions, nervous energy building between them. It made Will's skin prickle in fear and anticipation, the expectation that this would end in disaster. Talking about it only made concern spike in him stronger, the cause of the sweat on his palms and shortness of breath clutching at his lungs.

“But... How am I supposed to go in there and just... not show my abilities?” he questioned. “What little I have of them, anyway.”

“I really don't know.” She sighed, and her calm demeanour was doing nothing to settle his panic. “I don't even know where to start when I walk in there.”

“Hyperventilate?”

Time seemed to pass differently here; it felt as if he were stepping into the unforgiving atmosphere of the gymnasium within minutes.

The Gamemakers' eyes fell on him immediately, interested in what the District 4 tribute would do. One of their last Careers- this would be interesting. *Sorry to disappoint*, he thought, and strolled over the materials for making lures. His hands were swift and practiced; making lures was a second nature to him, and he completed one in record time. Some of the Gamemakers had looked away by now, obviously deciding that Will wasn't worth their time. He smiled. It was exactly what Jack wanted.

Almost all the Gamemakers had lost interest after a minute or two, and relaxation finally began to spread throughout him. Eventually, a little lost on what else he could do, he came across the knives, ran a fingertip along a blade. Picking it up, he stood, ready to throw- but not too well, of course. Shutting his eyes, he was unable to do anything but visualise Lecter. One of his hands had been on Will's waist, the other on his arm. Will had felt his breath on the shell of his ear. Every word he had said felt like it was burned into Will's mind, and he forgot about Jack's instructions completely as he threw the knife, remembering how Lecter had taught him.

A *thwack*. His eyes opened.

The knife had hit the target dead-centre.

Oh *no*.

Horrified, he snapped his head up to look at the Gamemakers. They were *all* looking now. A few were even nodding and murmuring in approval. His mouth had dropped open in shock,

and he stood, frozen for a second as he stared at them.

“You may go now, Mr Graham,” one of them said.

The anxiety didn't show until he entered the elevator, finally in the welcome arms of privacy. An alarmed sob tore from his throat, embarrassing but necessary. His emotions seemed to bubble quick here in the Capitol, days away from death, but his panic felt justified. That display would *not* get him a 1 or 2. How could he have been so *foolish*?

“You aren't *foolish*,” Margot assured later. “I guarantee you it won't be as bad as you think. One misstep doesn't mean you've lost the game.”

As it turned out, she was right.

Sitting on the sofa with Bev and the others after dinner, he watched as the tributes got their scores. Hannibal Lecter scored an 11. No surprise there. Chiyoh pulled a 10, and so did Tobias Budge. The Boyle siblings from District 3 both scored low. And then it was Will. His face flashed up on the screen, followed by the number 7.

He grimaced. Not as low as they would've liked. But still, a seven. It wasn't unfixable. Beverly came up next, and a 5 appeared below her face. The rush of relief throughout the room was tangible, intoxicating with its immensity. That screen could easily have produced a death sentence, but instead, there was hope, bright and rising over the horizon like the morning sun.

“Five and seven,” Jack said, looking at them, impressed. “We can work with that.”

***

Heady lightness disappeared with sleep, and Will awoke to the cold reminder that this was potentially his final day of life. The sun was setting already- would he live to see his sister again? Would he ever feel the winds from District 4 on his face once more? It was hard to focus on the overload of instruction from Jack and Freddie with those thoughts darting around his head, choking him whenever he gave them free reign.

“Oh, before I forget, you two,” Freddie said, as they finally got up to leave, “do you have your District tokens? I'm supposed to pass them on to the review board, and then they'll get to Alana and Margot after that.”

Will watched as Beverly removed her necklace, swallowing nervously as she prepared to see it taken away. When Freddie turned to him, he reached into his pocket and retrieved the locket with shaking hands. It was the small fragment of his identity that he could take with him into the arena, the small portion of home he got to keep close as he walked to his death. He was glad it was such a private matter, simply handing it to Freddie in their suite, and not part of the publicity spectacle the rest of this experience was. The Capitol wouldn't understand. To them, he was just another tribute. No locket or bluebell would mean a thing to them.

He could only think of this later that night, leaving the elevator with Bev to make his way backstage for the interviews. This was his last chance to stand out. To be somebody who sponsors wanted. To *not* just be another tribute, like a good portion of them ended up being each year. There were too many of them to care about all of them. People usually picked a few to root for. Will had to make sure he was part of that few.

“Nervous?” Bev asked.

“Yeah,” he whispered, “you?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, as they made their way over to the other tributes. Her lack of conversation was enough to indicate the true extent of her unease- they had never really needed many words between them, but that didn't mean they didn't use them.

“Well *you* don't need to worry- you'll be a natural,” he said, attempting to keep things light. “I'll be absolutely terrible.”

“You *won't* be,” she consoled.

Will was about to reply, careless words of disagreement ready on his lips, but was interrupted by another voice.

“Hello, Will,” said Hannibal Lecter from behind him, and Will huffed in annoyance. Couldn't the guy just leave him alone? “May I have a word in private with you?”

Will sighed, and finally flicked his eyes over to him. Well. He was also in a suit; tailored and expensive- which Will supposed was to be expected, seeing as they were in the Capitol- but he looked a whole lot better than Will did. It was almost shameful, finding another tribute this attractive. Will cleared his throat uncomfortably, feeling an inappropriate stab of want at the sight of Lecter, and found his voice.

“Sure,” he managed, and Lecter's mouth formed a smile. Will glanced apologetically at Bev, but she just waved him away as he was led over to a secluded corner. They were still in full view of everyone, but now nobody could hear them. It was a little embarrassing talking to Lecter again, after what he had said last time, after he had been so hastily cruel. But... didn't *know* Lecter. He didn't care. He *shouldn't* care.

“You look lovely tonight, Will,” Lecter remarked, his eyes soft as he held Will's gaze.

“Is that what you brought me over here to say?”

“No,” was the quiet response. “I just thought it should be mentioned.”

“Oh, um. Thank you?”

Lecter didn't reply to that, just smiled at him for a moment before averting his eyes to the floor, swallowing. It was a genuine smile and it send Will reeling with wonder, like a child witnessing snow for the first time, transfixed. “Will,” he began delicately, and Will knew that he was choosing his words perfectly. “I... I want to request for you to be my ally. Formally. I

didn't ask for that last time, simply shared my opinion. I know you don't want any other allies... but I'd be disappointed in myself if I didn't at least try."

What.

"But... I... I got a *seven*," Will uttered, staring at Lecter in disbelief.

"So?"

"Well, you got an eleven. Why would you want *me* as an ally?"

"Like I said, I find you-"

"Intriguing, I know," Will snapped. "But that *can't* be the only reason. That's *ridiculous*. It doesn't make sense, you wouldn't want me as an ally just because I'm *interesting* to you. There has to be more to it than that."

"My reasons are my own," Lecter replied simply. "Please, tell me. Will you be my ally?"

"I... can't. I'm sorry," he said, actually feeling *guilty*, despite the fact that he was talking to someone that would most likely be trying to kill him tomorrow. Lecter had come up to him, and personally asked him to be his ally- it was completely unexpected, and kind of brave. Lecter had the habit of doing the unexpected, and it unnerved Will.

Lecter nodded in unsurprised acceptance. "Thank you for humouring me, Will. Good luck out there," he replied, with an inclination of head toward the stage. He moved to walk away, but before Will quite knew what he was doing, his hand was shooting out to prevent him from leaving. Lecter frowned at him, inquiring.

"I lied," Will admitted, the words tumbling out. "When I said I didn't find you interesting, I lied. I do find you interesting. *God*, you're fucking fascinating. I want to be your ally, I *do*, but I can't. Bev comes first."

"I see." He seemed to be considering something, before he finally spoke again, "if you need it, the offer is still open. If you find yourself in a situation in the arena where you need an ally that isn't Miss Katz, then I'm sure we can arrange something."

"Wait- what? *Really*?" Will was shocked by the kindness of it. He had spoken to Lecter a grand total of three times, and now the guy was offering to put everything on hold for him in the arena, *just in case* he wanted to be allies, an unlikely possibility anyway. "What about anyone else? Your... other allies, and stuff."

"I don't have any other allies," Lecter said, somewhat bemused. Will took a second to process it, expression fixed in utter bewilderment as he held Lecter's eyes.

"You only asked for *me?* What about the other girl from your district? The tributes from Two?"

"They aren't going to be my allies."

“I... You're sure about this?”

“Of course.”

He felt a rush of confused gratitude toward Lecter, and realised, again, that he was gazing right into his eyes. It was as if somebody had stabbed him in the gut, spilling his innards out onto the floor to rest at their feet. It was bloody and real and honest. It was Fate, arching between them. Eye contact with Lecter made Will feel hollow, and not in a bad way. It just made him *feel*.

“Thank you,” he breathed. He didn't know why it sounded like a plea.

For a split-second, Lecter's face softened again, and he seemed to sway towards Will ever so slightly- almost unnoticeably. But Will was observant, just like Lecter had said. He was uncertain of what was going to happen, time feeling as if it were passing a month a minute, but they were interrupted by someone ushering them over to the nearly full line of tributes, which had filled up without him noticing. Clearing his throat, Will excused himself, the fabric of Lecter's suit brushing his as he left. He wasn't sure what Lecter would've done if they hadn't been interrupted. Nothing, probably. It hadn't been a movement with intent, it had been quite the opposite, actually. Something that he wasn't in control of. Something subconscious.

Something instinctive.

Will did his best not to look at the sea of people in the audience as Frederick Chilton bounded onstage, instead willing his breath to calm as the interviews unfolded. First, it was Chiyoh. She walked over the centre of the stage with the same amount of grace she always had, and held her head up high. Quiet and mysterious, she gained enough attention from the Capitol. And then they were calling Lecter over, and it was everything Will had expected it to be. He was charming, winning over the Capitol immediately- Chilton took an instant shine to him. District 1 tributes were always favourites anyway, and Lecter was irritatingly likeable, so Will wasn't surprised by it at all.

Doing his best to not get swept up into the hysteria of it all, he watched as Tobias Budge spoke of his love of music, complimenting the Capitol on its wide variety. Budge reminded him of Lecter, actually- there was something ruthless that was hidden underneath his pleasant demeanour. After the siblings from District 3 got through their interviews, it was Bev's turn.

“-and I'm just so grateful to be here, Frederick, I really am,” she gushed, impressing Will with her sudden talent for acting. “I do miss home, though,” she added.

When Chilton asked her about volunteering, and she answered him truthfully, about how Abigail was like a sister to her. The audience seemed to find it incredibly sweet, sighing and sobbing as she spoke, seeing as volunteering for family was rare enough, but volunteering for somebody you weren't related to was completely unheard of. As her time ended she'd made quite the impression, leaving everyone but Will, who was entirely numb with fear, half in love with her.

“Well, Will Graham. Hi. I think I speak for all of the audience when I say I've been looking forward to meeting you,” Chilton greeted as Will walked over on shaky legs, leaving his fear burning in his chest like alcohol.

Keep it together, Graham, come on.

“Well, I've been looking forward to meeting you too, Frederick,” he lied smoothly.

“Oh, you're too kind,” Chilton joked. “Now, do tell me, what's your favourite part about the Capitol so far? Is it very different from District Four?”

“Well, it doesn't smell like fish, for starters.”

It wasn't funny in the slightest. But it made the audience laugh. There was nothing funnier to them than complaining about the Districts, right? Will felt control slipping back into his body, and began to feel more confident as Chilton asked him more questions. He poked fun at the opening ceremonies and his outfit, managing to make the audience laugh a little more, and talked evasively about his training score- “luck, I think,” he justified. They seemed to have enjoyed his interview, and Will thought that it really hadn't been that bad, relief tinging his brain. But then Chilton asked about Abigail. And then he didn't want to talk anymore.

“She's your sister?”

“Yes,” he mumbled.

“So did you ask Beverly to volunteer for her if she was reaped?”

“No, no, I...” Will had been going for *funny*, not monosyllabic. But he'd been made them laugh enough so far, couldn't he just add in a little bit of sincerity? “Beverly volunteered for Abigail without me asking her to. It was her own choice.”

“And can I ask why you volunteered?”

“Because Beverly did. I... I made her a promise, once.” The audience was silent, and Chilton gave Will and encouraging look, as if to ask him to carry on speaking. “The night before our first ever reaping, she told me she was scared. Not just scared of getting reaped, but... scared of dying alone.” He had to raise his voice; it was barely a whisper at the moment. “I promised her that if she ever got reaped, then I'd volunteer with her.”

"And why did you do that?" The question was unexpected, because to Will, the answer was glaringly obvious.

“Because she's my best friend. And I'd do anything for her.” Will kept his head down. He wasn't ashamed, but it felt *wrong*, sharing this personal memory with all of these strangers that were willing to watch him fight to the death the very next day. That memory belonged to him and Bev.

“Does 'anything' include dying?” Honestly, someone needed to tell Chilton to work on his tact. But still, what was the harm in telling the truth?

“Yes,” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

dhkshgdrjfd will he wants to be ur ally because he wants to bang you

so i'm thinking about having a more consistent updating schedule? maybe like 2 or 3 times a week?

Chapter 7

The audience gasped, but it was drowned out by the buzzer, music to Will's ears.

Sitting tensed and uncomfortable due to the curious and suspicious glares he was getting from the other tributes, he noted their interviews. Franklyn Froideveaux was incredibly dull, not having much to say that was any of interest- Will thought he mentioned cheese at one point? Randall Tier was surprisingly sociable, adopting a completely different personality once in front of the audience, and spoke of his love of animals, which was expected. He often came across as one to Will. Matthew Brown was quiet and subdued. But there was something about him- Freddie had been right, he was a threat. Will wasn't sure why, but he definitely had to be careful of him.

As dull as it was, Will tried to remember small things about each of the tributes. It could be key to surviving in the arena. It would only really be helpful if he remembered any of it, however: as quickly as he'd taken it all in, it was already half-gone, lost to the haze of panic that came with his last night before the Games. His daze lasted the rest of the evening; he didn't speak a word while they ate dinner or watched the replay of their interviews. It occurred to him again that this was it. He was going into the arena tomorrow, and he didn't stand a chance.

Watching the interview back, he didn't even know if he'd even done enough to score sponsors. He didn't particularly stand out. He wasn't at the very beginning, or the very end. He was just another unimportant tribute hidden in the middle, a tribute that might not go completely ignored but certainly wasn't victor material. He'd failed Jack. He'd failed Bev. And he'd failed Abigail. He had promised her he'd try to win… well, he *had* tried. But it clearly hadn't resulted in much. He could imagine her now, sitting at home with his mother, terrified. Her big brother could die tomorrow.

Knowing him, he'd be dead before he stepped off the podium.

“Goodbye,” Freddie said to them before they went to bed, clasping their hands in hers. “And good luck. I'm sure you'll do great.”

Jack, predictably, didn't have anything to say about luck.

“Stay alive. Fight. Find food, water, shelter. Don't put yourself in unnecessary danger, not even for each other. You can do this.”

The words didn't reassure Will, and he kept thinking about them when they went to bed. Sick terror was swamping his brain, feeling as if it were drowning him, a bitter taste at the back of his throat. There was no escape from this. Back home, the worst he'd experienced was near-starvation, but then there was always someone who took pity on them, loaning them a loaf of bread or inviting them to a seat at their dinner table. People helped each other out, when they lived like that, surrounded by poverty. It wasn't like the Capitol. It wasn't a selfish existence out there, in the rest of Panem.

Then again, he supposed… was starvation the worst thing he'd experienced? Or was that the loss of his father?

There was no cure for grief. Only time, and even that didn't heal, not entirely. It was simply a bandage to the wound, and the blood still came, heavy and sad.

“Talk to me about something,” Beverly murmured, breaking the quiet.

“Like what?”

“Anything. I need a distraction." She paused, considering options, before she eventually decided, “tell me about you and Lecter.”

“What *about* me and Lecter? What is there to tell?”

“There's pretty obviously something going on there. You don't have to tell me, Will, but I would like to know.”

“I... He wants me to be his ally. Like, a lot. The other day, he told his mentor he wanted me when she asked, but this time, he asked me personally, face to face.”

“Oh... Wow. You got a seven, though? Why would *he* ask?”

“I know, right? I can usually read people, but Lecter...” He trailed off. Sadly, it wasn't dark enough to hide his expression from Bev.

“You've got a *thing* for him,” she accused.

“Don't *you* have a thing for him? Doesn't everyone?” he wondered. “I mean, come on, did you see him tonight?”

“I see your point, Graham, I really do. But you have to be careful, he's another tribute... he's...”

“The enemy, I know. Did you seriously think I forgot what was happening tomorrow? I think he's *attractive*, Bev, it doesn't mean I'm falling in love with him,” he snapped sourly, and the light, playful mood disappeared from the room.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered after the stilted halt to their conversation had stretched between them for a few minutes. His heart swelled with sorrow.

“I know. So am I.”

They fell into uneasy silence after that, both desperately trying to fall asleep. The air was overflowing with it all, the growing worry and terrified contemplation. What would tomorrow bring? Only greater horrors that even he could imagine, surely. Only the resting place of twenty three teenagers, made into nothing more than a pastime for the rich. Will was afraid of dying- he wasn't *that* brave. But if he weren't, even then, he knew he would want to die for something worth it. This… it was meaningless.

“What do you think it'll be?” Bev whispered to him after hours of laying next to each other quietly. “The arena? What do you think it'll be like?”

“I don't know,” he replied.

“I'm scared, Will. I'm fucking terrified,” she said, her voice thick with holding back tears.

“Me too.”

Will didn't get much sleep that night. Bev was restless beside him, tossing and turning, but he wasn't. He lay completely still. Her constant fussing didn't exactly bother him, he knew he would still be awake, even if she were completely peaceful. While he didn't feel the same kind of agitated nerves that Beverly was experiencing, he was still scared out of his mind. It was just more of a quiet acceptance of his imminent death.

Maybe it wasn't all bad. Maybe he would see his father again, in the next life.

***

It was early the next morning that they were woken. If his busy time in the Capitol had felt like it stretched on forever, that was no longer the case. This was the quickest morning of his life. Everything was moving too fast, and he wasn't ready for this. He wasn't ready to leave the Capitol, however much he hated it, and he definitely wasn't ready to leave Bev.

“Will, don't you dare die,” she pleaded, as Alana and Margot arrived to escort them away.

“I won't, I swear,” he vowed. “But you can't, either. You can't do that to me.”

“I wouldn't, you know I wouldn't. But you have to promise me.” Her lower lip was trembling. It was such an Abigail thing to do, and he felt a horrible pang of homesickness as he looked at Bev.

“What?”

“You always keep your promises, Will. You have to promise me you won't die.”

Swallowing convulsively, his throat suddenly dry, he nodded. Now he had to keep this promise to two people.

“I promise.”

With one last hug from Bev, he was led away from her. It felt as if he was walking to his death. As cripplingly terrifying as it was, he wished that the walk would last forever. It didn't. Time seemed to pass in a blur; it all blended together, and before he knew it, he was standing in front of Alana in the Launch Room, his tracker in his arm, death waiting at his shoulder. He didn't pay attention to what he was going to be wearing, just dressed mechanically, going through the motions and feeling strangely detached from what was going on.

“Are you scared, Will?” Alana asked. It seemed like a stupid question, but Alana was just being kind, he knew.

“Yes,” he said, his voice small. “I don't want to die, and I don't want Beverly to die. I want to go home.”

“I know,” she comforted soothingly. “But you won't die.”

She sounded so sure that Will didn't even think to question her. He looked into her blue eyes, and he was reminded of home, of the blue river and the blue sky and his sister's similar big blue eyes; he was stuck between feeling comforted and sad. 'Bittersweet' was the word he decided on in the end. Feeling was spreading back into his body as they sat on the couch to wait, and then the fear hit him straight in the chest, winding him.

“Oh god,” he moaned, dropping his head into his hands.

“Will?” Alana inquired worriedly, shifting over, placing a hand on his arm.

“I don't want to do this,” he babbled, lifting his head and clenching his hands into fists. “I don't want to go out there. *Please* don't make me go out there.”

Alana's eyes filled with unshed tears all of a sudden, which Will found surprising. She had done this before, this was far from her first year as a stylist, so he had assumed that however she felt about the Games personally, she had gotten used to saying goodbye to her tributes. Apparently not.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered, her confident surety from before now gone. “I'm sorry, but you have to.”

“What do you think happens when you die?” he asked.

She didn't answer.

“Do you think it hurts?”

“I... I don't...” She frowned.

“Do you not get asked those kind of questions a lot?”

“No,” she said. “Most of them don't like to talk. Some of them are so sure of themselves that they aren't scared of dying. One or two ask. I never know how to answer.”

“You don't want to lie to them,” Will realised aloud. “You don't want to lie to them and say you think everything will be fine. But telling the truth is just as horrifying.” She nodded miserably. “What do you think is the truth, Alana?”

“I think it would hurt to die. Of course it would,” she admitted, not looking him in the eye. “But should I really say that kind of thing to a child about to fight to the death?”

Her tone was disdainful, and it gave him the answer to the question that he had been distantly curious about. Alana didn't approve of the Games. Despite living in the Capitol and being quite privileged, she didn't approve. His respect for her increased tenfold, and he actually felt quite sympathetic. Talking to scared children who could be about to die seemed pretty awful.

“I don't know. Maybe you shouldn't,” he replied. “But I guess I already knew it would.”

“I really am sorry, Will,” she told him, her voice sincere.

“I know. It's okay.”

Alana didn't reply. There wasn't really much to say. Instead, she retrieved the locket from the table before them, hands trembling as she fastened it around his neck. It fell upon his chest, over his heart. Longing unfurled in him as he brushed a hand over it, thinking only of his sister and the petals of the flowers she liked to pick. How human. How distant. He wondered vaguely what she was doing at the moment, if she had a bluebell of her own, clutched tight in her fist as she waited for darkness to swallow Will whole. He hoped the flower gave her strength- it was certainly doing him a lot of favours, fierce and eroding where it rested against him. It was no protection, but it was certainly meaningful.

“Prepare for launch.” A cool voice spoke clearly into the room, and Will's insides turned to ice. It was time. Reluctantly, he stood, and began the walk to the glass cylinder that ultimately meant his death. He was terrified, but he was adamant of one thing- he would enter that arena with some dignity, and his head held high. He would not go in kicking and screaming, unwilling.

Stepping onto the metal cylinder, he turned to face Alana.

“With the sponsors and stuff... Bev is the priority. She has to survive. Tell Jack and Freddie that.” Alana looked shocked, resistant, and in one last bout of desperation, he added, “please.”

“Okay.” She was choked up.

And then she was gone.

The cylinder was rising, and it kept going upwards, through the dark, until he could feel wind whistling past his ears, pushing his hair into his eyes. He blinked, trying to see through it, and his eyes finally adjusted to his surroundings. A big, flat, grassy plane and the Cornucopia were in front of him, to his right, a lake, and everything else was forest. Then, he remembered the most important thing.

Beverly.

It didn't matter where he went, he had to get to her first, no matter what. He scanned the faces of the tributes quickly, searching for her, all the while feeling guilty for not doing it first. Finally, he spotted her, and her eyes met his, wide and panicked, just as as the announcer began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!"

The countdown started. Bev looked away, probably checking for places they could go, and Will heard himself swallow. The terror he had felt down in the Launch Room was much more real up here, almost tangible. He could taste it in the air, like metal, like blood. Bev turned

back to face him again, and made a subtle inclination of her head in the direction of the woods. Will nodded at her. After sharing one last desperate glance, they looked back to the Cornucopia.

Twenty seconds later, the gong sounded.

Will ran.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will ran towards Beverly.

They were going to go to the woods, yes, but he had to *get* to her first. What if he went straight for the woods and she wound up getting killed? He couldn't let that happen. Instead, he was running across the paths of other tributes, and getting unceremoniously shoved away. They were all desperately trying to get to the Cornucopia, and reach the weapons and supplies. Zig-zagging across the ground to get to Bev through the thick lines of tributes wasn't working, and he ended up closer to the Cornucopia than he had intended. Somebody pushed past him, *hard*, and this time, he was thrown to the ground, rolling even nearer to the mouth of the Cornucopia. One of the tributes grabbed some weapons next to Will, and turned, noticing him. Will couldn't tell if he was a Career or not, but a sick, demented smile slowly spread onto his face as he looked at Will, and drew his bow to shoot. Scrambling backwards, he realised that he didn't have enough time to get up, and the bow was trained on him now, so...

“Will!” Someone shouted. It didn't sound like Beverly.

He was going to die.

Watching in horror as the bowstring drew back, he thought instantly of Abigail, and how she would feel seeing this. Seeing her brother die two minutes into the Hunger Games. More than anything, he would've liked to see his little sister one last time.

However, his thoughts of Abigail were not his last. The boy's hands suddenly slackened, the arrow not flying and the bow slipping from his fingers. His face drooped, and he promptly began to cough up blood, spraying it all over Will. His legs buckled from beneath him and he fell, crumpling to the ground, and Will barely managed to crawl out of the way as he landed. Behind him, stood Hannibal Lecter, holding a knife and staring at him with dark eyes that Will was far too used to already.

“Will,” he hissed, leaning over the dead boy half on top of Will and grabbing his arm, roughly yanking him to his feet. Will stumbled against him, and Lecter clutched his waist to keep him upright. “Will, you need to go.”

“But I...”

“Now!” Lecter shouted at him frantically, pushing him away, in the direction of the woods.

“But Bev-” Will was cut off.

“You have to *go*, Will!” He shoved the knife into Will's hands and snatched up the bow, arrows, and a supply pack lying nearby, bundling them into Will's arms too. It was almost

comical, the panic-stricken break in his constant composure, but Will couldn't laugh. “Run!”

“I need to...” He hesitantly stepped backwards, vaguely noting the brutal bloodbath going on around him. And here he was, having a conversation. “Beverly.”

“Forget about her for now, Will, come on,” Lecter urged, giving him another push away.

Will was frozen now, desperately scouring the crowd of fighting tributes for her face.

“*Move!”* The shove Lecter gave him this time was so forceful that he stumbled back and almost dropped what he was holding, but it was incentive enough. He had to find Bev, and he *would*, but he couldn't, not right now. Lecter terrified him, so of course, he did exactly what he said. He took off towards the woods.

The wind whistled past his ears as he sprinted and it was almost impossible not to look back. Finally reaching the tree line, his supplies and weapons tumbled from his arms as he slowed down, grabbing at the trunk of a tree to stop his momentum. He whipped around to look for Beverly, but she was nowhere to be found. She could've been one of the dead tributes on the ground for all he knew. He made an aborted move forward to check, but remembered the urgency of Lecter's tone. He'd be killed if he went over there.

And Beverly might not be in his sight, but Lecter was.

Wow.

He was dodging the other tributes and their weapons with ease, twisting through the masses of bodies and people in and around the Cornucopia. A sword was in his hand, and he swung with instinctual expertise. Will was too late to look away. It went straight through another tribute's neck, cleanly slicing her head off, which went flying, landing metres away from its original position. Will tried not to retch, but stumbled backwards a little. He crouched, quickly putting the knife into his pack and hoisting it onto his back. He did the same with the arrows, slinging them over his right shoulder, and clutched the bow in his hands as he stood straight again, allowing himself one last desperate scan for Bev, before he turned, and ran away guiltily.

Will went as fast as he could; faster than he ever had in his life. Thankfully, the branches weren't that low-hanging, but he still had his clothes snagged on a few of them, and he kept tripping over. It couldn't have been any longer than half an hour when the cannons began to sound. Panting, he leant against a tree to catch his breath as he listened. They fired eight times. *Eight*. That wasn't many at *all!* The bloodbath had looked far worse than it had actually been, he supposed. There were still sixteen tributes in play, and Will didn't know if Beverly was one of them. God. He sunk to his knees, still gasping for breath, and a choked sound fought its way up through his throat.

He didn't know if Bev was alive. He wouldn't, not until tonight. Now, he felt paralysed with fear- what if him running off had meant her death? What if she was dead now, because of him? Technically, she had probably meant that they were supposed to meet up in the woods, but in the thick frenzy of the bloodbath, they had lost sight of one another. If she were alive right now, it was likely that she was in the woods *somewhere*, maybe even near to him.

Midday had been and gone. Surely it would be safe to stop? Flopping to the ground with an exhausted huff, he dropped the bow and removed the pack and arrows from his back. The pack was fairly light, but the arrows had been heavy, and his back was now aching from the strain. It had been hours since the bloodbath, and Will must've been a good few miles away now. Pain and all, he deserved a break.

Emptying out the contents of the pack, the first thing he found was a water bottle. He drank some of it down greedily, almost dehydrated from his hours of running, but managed to stop himself before too much was gone. He would need the water. Looking through the rest, he saw that he had a pack of dried fruit, a blanket, a first aid kit, and a flashlight. Then, of course, there was the knife. The knife that Lecter had given him.

Lecter really was a puzzle.

They weren't allies. It hadn't worked out like that, Lecter had chosen to stay and fight at the Cornucopia with the Career pack, which Will couldn't blame him for. But he had still *helped* Will, given him a knife, a bow and arrows, a pack. Will wouldn't have run if it weren't for Lecter, he knew that for sure. He would've died back there if Lecter hadn't knocked some sense into him. Lecter had saved his life.

The realisation was jolting. This boy who he barely knew had been so kind, looking out for Will, making sure he kept alive, and Will just didn't *understand*. He knew it was ridiculous, he was in the Hunger Games, fighting for his life, but he just couldn't stop himself from wanting to figure out Lecter. Everything about him was intoxicating; intriguing, and Will had always been someone who was good at reading people. Lecter seemed to be an exception. It bothered him.

He decided to stop thinking about someone who shouldn't be important to him and keep moving. Bev was the only person he could let his mind dwell on in here. Shoving the supplies back into his pack hurriedly, he made the choice to not rest until sundown. Then he could find somewhere safe to sleep for the night, having created a large distance between himself and the Careers, and tomorrow he would search for Bev. After that... he wasn't sure. They'd survive as long as possible, but then what? What would happen if they became the last two in the arena? He wouldn't kill Bev. He knew that with an absolute certainty. What he had told Chilton in his interview, it was true. He'd die for her, so no matter what, he wouldn't kill her. Would he let her kill him, when he'd promised Abigail that he'd try to win? Would she even try to kill him? What would the Capitol do if there were two tributes left, both refusing to kill each other?

What was the point in asking these things anyway, when they would likely never occur?

Heaving his pack and arrows onto his aching back, Will stood. This time, he didn't run at all. The sun wasn't beating down as hard as it had been before, and this was helped by the trees getting thicker as he walked further into the woods. It wasn't long until afternoon passed, and twilight began. Will kept trudging on, crunching through fallen leaves and hoping to find a source of food or water soon. He had water that would last him for now, but if he had to walk this far tomorrow as well, he'd need more water- he had to find a lasting source. A dried pack of fruit wasn't going to help him survive, either. He was weary of agonising over what to do, and was glad that it was almost dark. Looking at the sky, it seemed as if he had about an hour

to walk before night fell, and his aching limbs yearned for rest just thinking about it. Not long now, he told himself.

Will realised that he had been lost in his own head when he heard voices, and was shaken back to himself. Who could *that* be? He crept a little closer to what seemed to be a small clearing, trying to hear their voices more clearly. They were both male, from what he could tell, and after a few seconds, one of them said something that sounded final, and the voices stopped. The unmistakable sounds of someone walking away followed the abrupt ending to their conversation, and Will got the impression that the two tributes were setting up camp here for the night, and one had just left to try to find food or firewood. Whoever was still there was humming off-key, and Will finally made the decision to peek through the thick line of trees to see who it was.

Franklyn.

Almost breathing a sigh of relief, he slumped against the nearest tree, feeling the frightened tension inside him fade away. *Franklyn* wasn't a threat, not at all. Especially as he was on his own at the moment. And terrible as it was, he had to find out anything he could about what happened to Beverly- Franklyn would be easy to convince. Snatching an arrow from the sheath, he fumbled with it until it ended up in more or less the right position, strode out into the clearing, directly in front of Franklyn, and lifted his arms to point the arrow at his head. Franklyn gasped, his eyes wide, and held his arms up in surrender.

“Oh god, please, *please* don't kill me,” he begged.

Unexpected pity swept through Will in a wave, and he almost lowered his bow. Almost.

“I'll shout,” Franklyn threatened in desperation.

“I'll shoot,” Will retaliated. “I'll shoot before you can even open your mouth.”

He wouldn't. That was why he had been glad it was Franklyn- if it were Budge or Lecter for example, they wouldn't see him as a threat, not even for a second. He didn't know *how* to use a bow and arrow, which was what Franklyn didn't know and what somebody else might've been able to figure out. He knew what archery looked like, but he had never actually held a bow before: and here he was, using it as a weapon. He had initially decided that the bow and arrow were useless, but had kept them anyway, as an afterthought. Apparently he needed them after all.

“Look, just take anything you need,” Franklyn bargained, nodding to a pack on the ground next to him. “We have food, weapons. Take them, please.”

“I don't want your supplies,” he hissed through gritted teeth. He needed to know. “I just want information.”

Franklyn seemed convinced enough, staring at him in undisguised terror. Will knew he must've looked a sight: drying sweat plastering his hair to his forehead, his clothes covered in dirt and leaves, blood spattered across his face and matting in his curls, and a half-crazed glint in his eye.

“I'll tell you anything!”

“Beverly Katz. The girl from District Four. Did you see where she went? Do you know if she's alive?”

“I don't... I don't know, I don't remember...”

“Please,” he suddenly found himself saying. “Please, try.”

“I don't remember anything, I really don't. But Tobias said it was mostly the tributes from the poorer districts that got killed,” Franklyn offered.

“Tobias?” Will suddenly felt quite sick.

“Uh, yeah. He's my ally.”

“You're allies with *Budge*?”

It didn't make sense. Franklyn wasn't really anything special, he'd only gotten a 3 in his training score if Will remembered correctly. Budge, on the other hand, didn't really need an ally, especially one like Franklyn- he'd scored a 10, after all. To Will, there were three possible explanations. The first was that Budge simply enjoyed Franklyn's company, and wanted him as a friend and ally. But it was unlikely. Will had seen them talking to each other back in training, and Budge's irritation towards Franklyn was ridiculously obvious. He didn't know why they'd been talking, and assumed it meant nothing, seeing as Budge would never want Franklyn as an ally. Another possibility was that Tobias was attracted to Franklyn, and was overlooking his annoyance towards him because of this. Will found it hard to believe that Budge would let something as simple as attraction dictate who his allies were anyway, so that was out. But if it had nothing to do with attraction or friendship, it left only one reason.

Budge was a psychopath.

He was a psychopath, who let Franklyn be around him because he wanted to see what would happen, or he was looking forward to killing him or something. His motivations were cruel, Will knew that much.

Will had always been interested in how the mind worked. When he was ten, he decided that school wasn't teaching him enough and neither were the books available to him, so he had picked the lock on the door at the back of the library, which only Peacekeepers were allowed through. The room was filled with confiscated books. He hadn't known why a book on psychology had been confiscated- now he realised that President Verger probably didn't want anyone in the districts figuring out how much of a sadist he was. But still, he had read up on psychopaths out of mere childish curiosity, and now he was in an arena with one. Considering it more carefully, Budge might not have even been the only psychopath in here. But Budge was the bigger threat at the moment, so Will could only focus on him.

“Yeah, I don't get it either, but hey, he's a Career, and I need protection,” Franklyn explained.

“Stay away from Tobias Budge,” Will warned. “He's dangerous.”

“Yeah, that's the whole point-”

“I mean it. I don't know why the hell I'm telling you this, but you need to be careful of him. Seriously.”

“No offence,” Franklyn started, “but I think I'm more inclined to trust the person who isn't pointing an arrow at my head.”

“Fine. Don't believe me. But don't say I didn't warn you,” Will snapped. “Why are you and Budge this far from the Cornucopia, anyway? Why isn't he with the other Careers?”

“Hannibal didn't want him there, I think. That was the impression I got. Tobias is pretty angry about it, actually.”

“Hannibal's at the Cornucopia?” He winced as soon as it left his mouth. He had guessed that he was there anyway, but he hadn't known for sure. Why was he asking? He didn't care. And why had he called him *Hannibal?*

“Yeah. The girl from District One and the boy from District Ten are there, too.”

“*Tier* is there?”

That was strange. Hannibal- no, *Lecter*- hadn't even mentioned him to Will. They didn't seem like they would work well together, and Tier was an unusual choice of ally for someone like Lecter. Then again, the same could be said for Will.

“Yeah, from what I could see. Look, have I given you enough information? Please can you just let me go?”

“You're sure you don't know anything that could help me find Beverly?”

“I'm sorry, but I don't know anything.”

“Okay,” Will said, sighing, and lowering the bow. “Thanks, Franklyn. And good luck,” he added.

“Yeah, you too.”

Franklyn looked up at him gratefully, obviously relieved to not have the bow pointing at him anymore, but his eyes suddenly widened. They flicked to Will and to a spot over his shoulder, an odd switch of attention. Will's heart leapt in his chest and he spun, Franklyn's gasp dying in his throat. There was someone standing behind him.

It was Budge.

Chapter End Notes

enjoy!!! hopefully i'll get chapter 9 edited soon and post it later this week, if not it hopefully won't be too long.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, that was *rude*,” Budge accused, tutting at Will. “Pointing an arrow at poor Franklyn here. I'm afraid I can't stand for that.”

“I...” Will was frozen in shock. He could run, he *should*, but he wasn't. He couldn't move.

“Tobias, maybe we should just let him go. He didn't hurt me. He's not that much of a threat,” Franklyn suggested.

“Perhaps not. But I am looking for a way to get back at Hannibal Lecter. This might be it.”

“Why do you want to get back at Hannibal?” Will asked, with a burst of sudden curiosity. He was far too scared to berate himself for using Lecter's first name.

“He thinks he's too good for me,” Budge hissed, taking a step closer to Will. His words were slow and calculated, terrifying. “He doesn't want me as an ally. He underestimates me, so I’m going to show him exactly what I'm capable of.” A sadistic smirk twisted its way onto Budge's face, and Will's breath caught.

“And why am *I* the way to get back at Hannibal?” he questioned, regaining control of his limbs and taking a tiny step backwards. He needed to stall as long as possible- maybe he'd end up distracting Budge long enough to give himself time to run.

Budge laughed; a low, cold, hollow laugh, and cocked his head at Will. “Now I don't claim to be an expert on Hannibal Lecter, but you really aren't aware of the effect you have on him, are you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Will said, shuffling further away again.

“He's-” Budge's voice cut off. He raised an eyebrow at Will, and nodded to his feet. “You really think you stand a chance at getting away from me?”

Will didn't reply, and instead turned to sprint. He didn't even make it two steps before Budge caught up with him in a few strides, and yanked him back by the collar. Budge spun Will around, and lifted him by his throat, pinning him to the nearest tree. He grinned viciously, and held Will there tighter, pushing upwards so that Will's feet dangled in the air. With the amount of pressure Budge was putting on his neck, if Will didn't get free of his grip soon, his windpipe would be crushed.

“Please,” he choked out.

“Nice try, District Four. But you aren't getting out of this one.”

His muscles were starting to go slack. The arrow he had been holding onto slipped from his fingers, falling to the ground. He was managing to still hang onto the bow, however.

“Lecter isn't here to save you this time, Graham.”

Lecter wasn't here to save him? Budge had evidently seen what happened during the bloodbath, but *still*. How *dare* he! Will wasn't some damsel in distress, he could take care of *himself*, and he didn't need Hannibal *goddamn* Lecter to save him all the time.

“Screw you,” Will spat, and gathered all his strength to lift the bow he was clinging on to.

He swung it upwards, and it caught Budge on the side of his head, making him drop Will in shock and stagger to the side. Will fell to the ground, gasping air into his deprived lungs, and grabbed the deserted arrow that was lying about a foot away. When Budge lunged for him this time, he was ready. Budge was teetering above him, arms outstretched, and Will was on the forest floor slumped against the bottom of the tree, which gave him an advantage. So he didn't wait to die: he clutched the arrow and *stabbed*. It lodged into Budge's thigh, and he howled in pain and outrage, stumbling back, away from Will. Will took this opportunity to stagger to his feet, grab the bow and run.

Crashing through the undergrowth at top speed, Will didn't know if Budge was following him. He didn't look back to check. Even if he was, it was likely that he wouldn't catch up with Will. He would've had to pry the arrow from his leg first, and even then, he obviously wouldn't be able to run properly on an injured leg. Either way, Will couldn't risk it. The pack and sheath of arrows were still bouncing on his back, occasionally catching on branches as he ran past, and he was still clinging to the bow with his right hand.

A week ago he'd been warm in his bed at home, Abigail's steady presence simply across the room. How did he end up here?

In his panic, Will didn't think to look where he was going. The predictable consequences of this were that he didn't notice when the ground veered suddenly downwards, and he fell head-first, tumbling down a hill. After rolling for what seemed like forever, falling over rocks and branches and logs, he came to an abrupt stop at the foot of a tree, hitting it with a painful thump and a strained groan.

His whole body throbbed with pain. On his side, his hands, his legs. He didn't want to move. Eventually, ignoring the violent protests from his muscles, he pushed himself up to a sitting position, leaning against the tree for support. It was darker now, but just light enough so that he could see the damage inflicted. His hands were covered in scrapes and cuts, and he could sense that his arms and shoulders were beginning to bruise. His clothes had somehow escaped tearing, as there were some minor scratches on his legs and stomach, but they weren't too bad. They could be ignored, it was the sore aching of his body that hurt the most. But there was nothing he could do about that.

As he scrambled for his pack, his hands closed on something else. Something wooden. Dragging it up out of the leaves, a broken half of his bow was revealed.

“No,” he hissed, fumbling for the other half, and finding it a few metres to the left.

He must've snapped it while he was falling down the hill, and now he was one weapon down. He still had the knife and the arrows, but the arrows wouldn't have the same effect if they weren't propelled by the bow. To be fair, he still had more weapons than he had originally imagined he would, so he couldn't really complain. Instead, he sat there, panting, and pulled out the first aid kit from his pack. His injuries were small, but he still cleaned and bandaged them, just to be safe.

Seeing as he had been immobile for quite a while and there was nobody running after him, he assumed that Budge had given up for now. He'd probably let his leg heal before he came after Will, and then he could rely on all of his strength. The prospect was distantly worrying, but Will was buzzing with fear at the realisation of how dark it was. Night was just beginning, which meant that it wouldn't be long until he saw the faces of the dead tributes. In a few minutes, he'd know if Bev was alive.

He was listening so intently that when the anthem started playing, he startled. Then, the faces began to appear. First, was the female Boyle sibling from District 3, and Will felt a little queasy as he saw her. She had been the girl that Lecter beheaded. Next was the boy from District 5, and he almost whooped in joy as it skipped District 4. Bev was *alive!* She could be hurt, she could be halfway across the arena from him, but she was *alive.* Relief flooded into his body, and he watched with a new kind of interest as the other headshots were displayed. The girls from District 6 and 7, both tributes from District 8. The last two faces to be displayed were the boy from District 9 and the girl from District 10. He recognised the boy from 8 as being the same boy who had tried to kill him back at the Cornucopia. In fact, his blood was still covering Will's face right now.

As Will did his best to scrub the blood from his face, he thought about the tributes left. No big threats had been eliminated. Lecter was still alive, which he was strangely glad for, but he had to admit that he hadn't even considered his death as a possibility. Chiyoh wasn't dead either, and neither was Budge, the girl from District 2, Tier or Brown. They were the tributes that were most likely to kill him; he wasn't worried about any of the others, most of which would probably just get killed off along the way. Will could actually be the one who would kill one or two of them. The thought of it, of actually killing someone... he could barely describe it. It felt like such an absurd idea, and Will was stuck between feeling horrified and powerful.

Powerful. Maybe the fall had affected him more than he'd thought.

Flecks of dried blood fell from his face, and he imagined what could be going on back home. Abigail should've been in bed by now, but because he was in the Games, his mother might've let her stay up longer. He wondered what they had thought about the Games so far- they had seen him point a bow and arrow at Franklyn, but they would understand that, because it was about Beverly. He didn't kill Franklyn, and he *wouldn't* have, so they would never hold it against him. But he was curious, however, about how they had reacted to the bloodbath, and Hannibal Lecter saving his life. They would've suddenly been thrown into the chaos at the beginning of the Games, and watched Will get saved by somebody they didn't know. If he was being honest, *Will* didn't really know Hannibal Lecter either. He maybe would've liked to, if they were anywhere other than trapped in the arena.

Sighing, he lurched to his feet and took a calculating look at the trees around him. None of them seemed easy to climb, and Will wasn't going to travel in the dark, not when he didn't know what creatures or tributes could be lurking out there, and that was the exact reason that he didn't really want to sleep on the ground either. He didn't really know how to climb trees, not properly, because he hadn't ever *needed* to. After his fourth failed attempt at scaling one, he gave up, sinking back onto the ground. It would be freezing if he just slept down here, but there wasn't any kind of shelter nearby, so it was his only option. The air was already becoming chilled, and Will reluctantly pulled his blanket out of his pack. It wouldn't be very good for camouflage, especially as he was just sleeping on the ground. A girl from District 7 a few years ago, Georgia Madchen, had won by killing people in their sleep. Someone could easily use that tactic this year, and Will wasn't exactly inconspicuous.

He didn't have a choice, though. It was too cold.

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The sound of the cannon was what woke him the next morning. It had taken him ages to get to sleep, but he must've done eventually, despite the cold. Another tribute dead. It could be Bev. Fear shot through him again, as he rolled up his blanket and shoved it in his pack. He drank a little bit of water, limiting himself, and allowed himself to break into the pack of dried fruit. He resisted to eat too much of it seeing as it was his only food, so after eating a little, he resealed the pack with an empty, yearning stomach. The sudden materialisation of a hovercraft made him start, and he was shocked at how close it was. He hoped it was someone dying of natural causes instead of being killed- if it was a murder, then it couldn't have been Budge, since it was in the opposite direction. Whether the tribute had been murdered or not though, Will still had to keep moving. He couldn't risk it.

Abandoning his broken bow, he gathered up his things and set off towards what he believed to be east. If he went straight ahead he might encounter the potential killer, and if he went back he'd just be returning to Budge, who was likely preparing to come after him anyway. It couldn't have been any longer than ten minutes before Will heard the sound of snapping twigs and crunching leaves, and he froze, listening intently. Whatever it was wasn't making any attempts to sound quiet, so Will just supposed that it didn't care- the footfalls were to heavy to belong so an animal, so maybe it was a Career tribute? He didn't know what to expect if it was Lecter, but if it was Chiyoh or the girl from 2, he was definitely in trouble. He realised this too late, and by the time he was about to start running away, a boy came hurtling through the trees. The boy came to a sudden halt at the sight of Will, and tilted his head oddly, seeming half in a daze. It was the boy from District 6, Will noted belatedly, and recalled that his name was Buddish, or something similar. That was right, Elliot Buddish. He hadn't talked much in his interview, and he'd kept mostly to himself during training. Will could now tell that there was something off about the boy- his movements were detached, like he was just doing them for the sake of it, instead of out of instinct.

Will didn't know what to do. This wasn't the same situation as Franklyn, who was ridiculously predictable. Franklyn was clingy and spineless, yes, but he was kind at heart, and wasn't prepared to kill anyone- at least not yet, anyway. Buddish wasn't any of those things. He seemed ready to kill someone in a split second.

Oh.

The cannon.

Will gasped, taking a step backwards, but Buddish was too quick for him, and sprinted towards Will at top speed, lunging and tackling him to the ground.

“Pleas-” His begging for mercy was cut off by Buddish working a hand around his neck, squeezing down, and preventing him from talking. Really, he hadn't even been in the arena two days, and two people had already tried to strangle him. He'd be incredulous if it weren't for the hand crushing his throat.

Buddish apparently *didn't* want to strangle him however, because he used his free arm to rummage in his pocket and pull out a knife, horribly sharp and glinting in the early morning sun. Will's own knife was buried in his pack somewhere, which was awkwardly digging into his back as he was held harder against the ground. The knife was too far for him to reach, and even if he could get an arm free from where Buddish was pressing him down to grab one of the arrows, they just wouldn't be the same as a knife. While he was considering all of his options, Buddish began to do something strange. He leant further over Will, dragging him up by his shirt a little, and peered down at his back, bringing the knife to rest on his shoulder blade. It pricked against his skin. Will didn't allow himself any time to be confused, and threw his entire body weight against Buddish, rolling them over so that they had switched positions, giving him the chance to snatch the knife from Buddish's hands, which had gone slightly slack in surprise.

“No,” Buddish growled, grappling with Will desperately, making grabs for the knife now clutched tightly in Will's fist.

“Please, please, I don't want to hurt...”

Buddish kicked his legs, wrapping them around Will's as he pulled, managing to spin them over again. A choked sound spilled from his mouth, and that was when Will realised the knife in his fist was lodged into something fleshy and real.

Buddish had impaled himself.

“Oh. Oh. *Oh*, God,” Will babbled. He'd be flailing his arms if they weren't trapped under Buddish. “I'm sorry, I didn't *mean* to, I...”

Buddish evidently wasn't listening. His eyes had gone unfocused, his body was now limp, and he was consistently dribbling out blood onto Will's face and neck. Blood oozed from the wound as well; hot and wet and red. With one last sigh, he dropped his head onto Will's chest, and the cannon fired.

Will retched, disgust arching in him as he began shoving the body off and scrambling to his feet. He frantically tried to draw breath in to his lungs, which felt as if they had seized up. His heart was hammering wildly, and his ribcage felt like a bone coffin settled in his chest. The only time he had ever felt this distressed was when Abigail had been reaped.

He looked over at Buddish's body, which lay limp on its side, chest still spewing blood, face lax. Redness was pooling around him like spilt wine.

Buddish was dead. Will had killed him. Will was a *killer* now.

He stumbled over to the tree closest to him, clung to it for support and vomited all over the ground.

Chapter End Notes

so i don't know how well any of u remember elliot buddish but there's a few of these killers that were only in 1 or 2 episodes to be used as background tributes. i hope the knife to will's back was reminder enough about that whole angel mess back in season 1 <3

aNyway i kind of think it's important to like? not make will this hardcore killer straight away. that's not who he is in my opinion, especially not during those early parts of the show. he will, of course, develop throughout the course of the whole series. feel free (PLEASE) to comment your thoughts below, and please stay tuned for more. Hannibal will be appearing soon, i promise!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Will eventually pulled himself together enough to walk, he guiltily grabbed Buddish's pack before setting off again. He felt terrible for doing so, but how else was he going to survive? He'd take everything he could get.

Walking dazedly and dreamily, he travelled for another half a day or so, until he couldn't even take another step, and collapsed exhaustedly onto the ground, dropping Buddish's pack beside him. He was hungry, thirsty, tired and in pain. His head was aching, his mouth tasted awful, and he was stuck between worrying over Bev and replaying the death of Buddish in his head. The bubbling panic and rage inside him finally rose to the top, and he tore off his own pack and arrows, chucking them as far as he could throw them with an unintelligible shout of anger, pulling from his chest without his permission. They didn't go very far. Obviously.

He choked back a sob, not wanting to let the Capitol see him cry, and allowed his head to fall into his hands. His sweaty palms almost slipped off of his equally sweaty forehead, but he twisted his fingers into his hair, anchoring them there. He felt disgusting; *dirty*, and not just literally. He was covered in a layer of grime and sweat, but so was his soul- he felt tainted by the death now on his conscience. Even if he survived this, even if he became victor, he would live with these memories forever. Feeling a new pang of sympathy for previous victors of the Games, he thought of Jack. His Games were before Will's time, so Will could only assume, but it was doubtful that he had gotten through the Games without killing anyone, especially as he was from District 4. It probably went through Jack's mind every day. If Will survived, would he ever be able to get over what had just happened?

Suddenly, a small silver parachute floated down past Will, and he jumped in surprise. Someone couldn't want to sponsor him, surely? He was giddily grateful, but then he opened the container.

It was a toothbrush.

Don't let your teeth rot. The Capitol's message couldn't be any clearer. They'd prefer a victor who looked pretty, after all. He almost threw up all over again, feeling sickening, suffocating fury towards his sponsors. Food, water, weapons. All of the things that could actually help him survive in the arena- but instead, he got a toothbrush. His first sponsor had given him a *toothbrush*. How fickle the Capitol were.

Hands shaking, Will finally checked Buddish's supplies, frustration too strong to even glance at his worthless gift. More water, a slingshot, a spearhead and, after inhaling its cloying smell, what Will could tell was a vial of sleep syrup. No food. Apart from the water, the scarce supplies that Buddish had owned were completely unhelpful to Will, but he moved them into his own pack anyway. Half of his arrows had been snapped in the fight, so he discarded the broken ones- technically, the others weren't very useful without a bow, but to give them some credit, they had been the reason he'd escaped Budge.

After allowing himself a few sips of water, he gathered up his supplies again, and began walking. He didn't know where he was going, he didn't have any information about Bev's whereabouts, so for now, he would just have to keep going. There was a horrible possibility that the first cannon had signified her death, and he was dreading finding out. What would he do if she died? It almost felt as if searching for her in the arena had given him some kind of purpose, and without her, he didn't know how likely it was that he would survive. Of *course* he wanted to survive for himself as well, for Abigail, for his mother. But wanting to survive for Bev was so much more immediate, so urgent. He had to find her. And to do so, he would *have* to survive, no matter what.

Even if he had to kill everyone else in the arena.

Even if he had to kill Hannibal Lecter.

Bev was too important.

It wasn't long before the dimness of twilight started spreading through the sky, and Will wondered if the Gamemakers had decided to shorten the days here. It wasn't unheard of; occasionally the Gamemakers liked to show everyone just how much control they had in the Games, even through little things like changing the length of the days for tributes. It was certainly possible this year, but then again, Will was still quite dazed from the morning, and easily could've just lost track of time.

Night had nearly come when he finally found somewhere he could stay. About halfway up a large tree, was a hollow that looked just big enough for Will to fit inside. Climbing the tree would be the biggest problem; he could go on and try to find somewhere else to sleep, somewhere easier, but night was rapidly falling, and he didn't want to end up sleeping on the ground again. Clutching a low-hanging branch, he found a groove where he could place his foot, and began to ascend the trunk. Soon, he had managed to make it up, and collapsed breathlessly onto the large branch next to the hollow, extricating his supplies from where they were slung over his shoulders after pulling out his blanket. He lowered himself into the hollow, which he could only really fit his legs and waist in, preparing to wait for nightfall, when he could find out if Bev was still alive. It must've been almost an hour, and while he waited, he watched ants march along the branch, the endless continuing of life, and let his eyes scan the trees for any sign of wildlife.

He was really quite hungry now- he had only had a bit of dried fruit in the past two days, and he had thrown that up hours ago. His stomach was achingly empty, but Will ignored it, opting to save the rest of his fruit for a later time when he would need it more. He had gone longer than this without eating, after all. He could cope. It didn't stop him looking for another source of food, though.

His pondering about a solution to his hunger was interrupted by the anthem blaring out, and his head shot up to stare at the sky. Buddish's face appeared first, and Will almost gagged, swallowing back his distress. The girl from District 9 was next, and the sky went dark. He felt sick again, but slightly comforted- Bev wasn't dead, and he still had a chance to find her, so they could somehow both survive. 'Somehow' being the operative word, seeing as he hadn't given much thought to how they would both get out of the arena in one piece. And what if they didn't? It wasn't unlikely that Bev could die before he even found her... or that *he*

would die. The idea was terrifying, but muted, as his fatigue was nearly consuming him. He wondered if he would wake to the sound of the cannon tomorrow, as well. There were fourteen of them now, a large amount considering that they were two whole days in, and Will didn't know if the next person to die would be him. He hoped not.

Hope was all he had, really.

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Mercifully, the cannon didn't wake him the next day, and he slept until late morning without interruption. When he did finally wake up, his empty stomach and painful limbs kept him in a dreary state, lying until the glaring light of midday began creeping through the canopy. He was just trying to force movement when the sound of voices and crunching leaves filtered through the air, causing him to tense in surprise. Whoever they were, they weren't passing underneath him, so he seemed to be safe, for now.

“-well with Graham gone, we have to find something else to get back at him with.”

Will almost froze all over again.

Budge.

His voice was coming from a small distance away through a few clumps of trees, and from the way it was travelling, Budge seemed to be walking parallel to Will. A silent sigh of relief fled his mouth as he calculated that he was far from Budge's eyesight- this, he could survive.

“Yeah, but what? I still don't understand why he was a good way to get back at him in the first place,” Franklyn was grumbling, trudging along beside Budge with heavy, dragging footfalls.

They were obviously talking about Lecter.

“Oh come on, Franklyn.” Budge laughed mirthlessly. “Even *I* can admit that Graham isn't bad looking, objectively. You figure it out.”

“Yeah but Hannibal can't seriously be affected by *that*, can he? He's been training for this his entire *life*, I doubt he'd let a boy who 'isn't bad looking' get in the way of him winning,” Franklyn reasoned. Will frowned. What the hell were they talking about? Why did the way he looked have anything to do with *Lecter?* Their voices were slowly getting quieter, and he strained to hear them.

“Well, there is still fourteen of us at the moment. He's probably allowing himself to indulge for now. And you have to consider, he's still a teenage boy with a working di-”

They had walked out of earshot. Will's mouth was bone dry, his stomach was clamouring for any kind of food, and his brain was shouldering the weight of a murder, but he still scrambled out from the hollow, unceremoniously shoving his blanket into the pack, hauling it with the arrows onto his back. He was desperate to hear what they were saying. By the time he had

managed to climb down the tree and catch up with them, Will had missed a large part of their conversation, and was immediately thrown into confusion all over again.

“So you think he's just using him? For what?” Franklyn questioned.

Were they *still* talking about him and Lecter?

“I don't know. I'm sure Tier has a lot of skills we're unaware of, but what Lecter wants with him is none of my concern. It's Chiyoh that I'm worried about,” Budge replied disdainfully.

“Didn't Tier score a nine, though? That's pretty high. Maybe we should be worried.”

“I know what I'm doing, Franklyn.” Budge's voice was so cold that Will almost stopped in his tracks. He actually felt sorry for Franklyn, and including the fact that he was likely a psychopath, Budge didn't seem like very good company at all. Their voices had faded a little, so Will tiptoed further forward, being careful not to make a sound.

“Who else are you worried about? What about Graham, and the girl from his District?”

“Five and seven aren't very high scores, you realise?”

“Yeah, but what if they were faking it? It wouldn't be the first time that tributes played it down in training. And they're from a Career District.”

There was a short pause in the conversation, where Budge didn't reply. They kept walking however, so Will still sneaked forward. He didn't dare look through the trees to see what had happened, and just waited for Budge to inevitably talk.

“You know, you have a point there,” Budge reluctantly admitted. “Still, Graham only got away through luck last time, so I don't think he's trained. And Katz is holed up somewhere the other side of the woods, so even if she is a problem, we probably won't encounter her.”

Will clapped a hand over his mouth, stopping himself from gasping aloud. *Beverly*.

“Did you see where she went, then?”

“Yes, she ran south, I think. I was more focused on the bloodbath, if I'm honest. But I think we're safe for now.”

Franklyn said something else, but it was too far away for Will to hear. It didn't matter, and he didn't try to catch up with them. He knew everything he needed to know for now.

Bev was *alive*, a truth he'd known since last night, but now he knew where to find her.

Chapter End Notes

so. i'm kind of hating this at the moment because i think these huge blocks of description with barely any dialogue are hard to get really into, also the first half of this fic was written a LONG time ago. I'm editing a lot but i think it's a huge step down from where my writing is nowadays, so i really hope you guys stay tuned a little longer for the (hopefully) significant improvement

Hannibal will be here soon, i promise. kudos and comments are appreciated <3

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

South was some unknown direction to Will, but the blind yearning to find her was enough to stifle any logic. Instead, he ran. Let his legs carry him as far as they could, felt wind whip past his ears as his breath came in short, heaving puffs. He ran until his muscles began to ache, straining and protesting as he forced himself forward, desperation shaping his every move, his every frantic gasp for air. Will was so caught up in worrying about Bev- would he find her today? Tomorrow?- that he didn't notice how muddy the ground was getting until he slipped and fell, landing in a small puddle.

“Ugh,” he grumbled aloud, wrinkling his nose up at his hands, that were now covered in mud from where he had tried to steady himself as he hit the ground.

His pants were now caked in it too, and he sighed, wondering what he could do to clean them. It took a minute for it to dawn on him- he seemed to be slower on the uptake today, likely due to the trembling elation he felt at the mere possibility of seeing Beverly.

Mud.

Scrambling to his feet, he splashed through the puddles and emerged through the trees onto a muddy riverbank. Momentarily not caring about any tributes that could be nearby, he whooped in delight, tearing off his jacket and shoes and jumping into the river. He didn't bother with the rest of his clothes; his pants needed cleaning anyway. God, he had missed water. Laughing, he let himself slip further down into the river, wetting the ends of his hair. For the first time since he'd come to the arena, he felt utterly at peace, and let his feet drift from the bottom of the river, floating him to the top, where he laid on his back and basked in the sun. He had almost finished one of his bottles of water now, and this meant that he could collect more- the only problem was that he had nothing to purify the water with. Maybe Bev did, and if he found her in the next few days he could hang on long enough to wait, seeing as he already had Buddish's bottle of clean water left.

Eventually he crawled out of the water, peeling off his sodden shirt and flopping onto the grassier part of the riverbank, wringing the shirt out and leaving it to dry on a rock. He had barely any food left, which made his insides run cold with fear and the peaceful feeling he'd been revelling in disappeared. At the moment, he was only running on a few pieces of dried fruit every day- no wonder he felt constantly exhausted. He wouldn't last much longer. Gulping down the last of the first water bottle, he dipped it into the river and filled it up. The mud from his pants had washed off and flowed downstream by now, but Will still couldn't be sure that the water was clean, so he would be relying on his other bottle for as long as possible. He didn't know how long that would be.

Will was so preoccupied with his worrying that he almost missed the silver parachute float past his head, and he yelped in surprise as he saw it. It very nearly flew over the river, but he

dived and caught it just in time, sitting back on his haunches and tearing whatever it was from the parachute.

It was a compass.

A *compass!*

This would help him find Bev! An overwhelming wave of gratitude washed over him as he felt it rest in his palm, nestled in his hand with a relieved sigh.

“Thank you,” he whispered to nobody in particular.

Was it the Capitol that had sent it to him? Or the one of the Districts? It could've even been Jack or Alana. The toothbrush had definitely been from the Capitol; their vanity was completely obvious through that gift, but the compass... that was different. That was helpful. And he would need it.

A laugh escaped him again, just as giddily as it had in the river, feeling actually optimistic for once. In nature, Will wasn't generally an optimistic person at all, whether it involved the Games or not. The only way he had gotten through the reapings was forcing himself to think about the factual chances he had of getting picked, instead of the worst case scenario, which in truth, was what he did with everything else. But now, with a chance to find Bev... Things seemed to be going his way.

The only problem now was that they were still both in danger, and while Will had an approximate direction to travel in, either of them could get killed before finding each other. Realising the possible urgency of the situation, he pulled himself to his feet, dragging the still soaking wet top over his head. It didn't matter; the rest of him was wet anyway. The sun was bright and warm, so he would dry off soon enough. After pulling his pack and arrows onto his back, he began walking south, holding out the compass in front of him. It wasn't long until he started feeling fatigue take hold of his brain.

It was understandable- he had been in the arena for three days without a proper meal, consistent water, or a decent night's sleep, and he'd even been beaten up twice already. He could hardly believe he'd only been in the arena for nearly three days; it felt like much longer, and he wondered how long the Games would last this year. Since there was still fourteen tributes alive, he guessed that they wouldn't be over anytime soon. The longest Games had lasted for almost a month before people had gotten bored, so the Gamemakers wiped out the majority of the tributes left, and orchestrated the outcome from thereon. Will hoped it didn't pan out like that this year, because that way, it meant that he had no control over his fate. He wanted to *survive*, and now that he had a way to find Bev, the desire to live was gripping him tighter than ever.

Will walked for what felt like forever; the arena seemed to be endless. Even if he squinted into the distance, he still couldn't see where the river would stop. Eventually, it became harder to see anyway, as the sun started to set below the horizon, which he could barely see through the thick masses of trees either side of him. The streaks of orange, pink and yellow in the sky began to fade into deep blue, and dusk slowly morphed into night. The rushing of the river beside him was a small comfort in the eerily silent night for a while, until nocturnal

bugs and creatures started to make themselves heard too. He was just thinking of settling down for the night when he stopped dead, so suddenly that he almost tripped over his own feet.

Not far ahead, a girl was crouched down over the river, and appeared to be washing something. She hadn't noticed him yet, as a thick curtain of dark hair blocked her face from his view.

Beverly?

He couldn't tell.

Cautiously, he took a few steps forward, uncertain of how to proceed. If it was Bev, then they'd both be near-euphoric, and everything would be fine. But if it wasn't Bev... Then he could be in danger.

A step forward.

Another.

Since it was dark, he was not only struggling to see the girl, but he couldn't see the ground either, and didn't notice the twig in front of him as he lowered his foot to the ground. It snapped, deafeningly loud in the quiet atmosphere of the night, and the girl's head shot up. She swiftly jumped to her feet, snatching something up from beside her and pointing it at Will.

As it turned out, her figure had been blocking a small lantern, and when she moved to stand, the small amount of light it was emitting spilled into the dark, illuminating her face. He recognised her as the girl from District 1- Chiyoh. The light also allowed him to see her hands, covered in splatters of dried blood. They were also aiming a crossbow at him.

His heart thumped beneath his ribs, and a broken noise of fear fell from his mouth.

“Relax,” she said, her unfamiliar accent wrapping it's way around the consonants. It was strange for someone to have a different accent this many generations after the formation of Panem, but not unheard of. Especially in District 1- that could be seen clearly from Hannibal Lecter, too. “I'm not going to shoot you.”

"Really? I mean, you are pointing a bow at me." He had found his voice easier than expected, and to his surprise it wasn't shaking. “And your hands are covered in blood.”

“Did you hear a cannon today? No. It's animal blood.”

He almost felt a pang of jealousy- what he'd give to have an animal right now...

“And I'm pointing my bow at you to ensure my safety,” she continued. “I'm not going to shoot you, Will. I just need to be sure that I will get to walk away from this.” Will? Why had Chiyoh called him *Will,* while people like Budge happily acknowledged him as Graham*?* There was a small nagging at the back of his mind telling him that she had spent the last few days with Lecter, and maybe that had something to do with it.

“Why won't you shoot me? Wouldn't it be easier just to get rid of another tribute?”

Chiyoh considered this, tilting her head behind the crossbow. “It's different, isn't it? Killing. It's different from what they told us.”

“You've killed people?”

“Person. Back in the bloodbath. It was an accident. But after, it felt...”

“It felt like someone had buried you alive. It felt dirty. Ugly,” he answered for her, after silence stretched between them for a minute, crisp and cold.

“*You've* killed people?”

“Just the one, like you. Mine was also an accident.”

“It's not at all like we were told.”

“I wasn't told anything. I wasn't trained, I wasn't prepared. I had... no idea that it would be like this,” he confessed, resentment churning in his stomach, sick and endless and wrong.

“Perhaps it would've been better to enter the arena with no idea of what to expect than an entirely false perception of it,” she suggested, her voice bitter.

“Perhaps. I suppose there isn't much we can do about it now. I mean, would you change it? If you could? I know *I* would. At least that way I'd have some comfort, even if it *was* fake.”

“Yes, I suppose I would change it. The fake comfort was useless in the end.” She sounded wistful. “I'm not going to kill you. I don't want kill again. Besides, Hannibal wants you alive for some reason, so you're safe for now.”

She made an aborted movement, as if to leave and lower her bow, but she didn't have any time before Will cut in. “Wait, *what?* Lecter wants me alive? *Why?* And *why* are you okay with keeping me alive for him?”

If he could see her face properly, he assumed her expression would be exasperated.

“Yes, he wants you alive. No, I don't know why. We haven't discussed the specifics, though I have my theories. And I owe Hannibal. If he wants you alive, then I won't interfere,” she explained slowly. The words lingered in the chilled air, surrounding him as he thought them through.

“So... What are your theories?” he questioned. His curiosity about Hannibal Lecter was reaching new heights.

“Surely you don't need my insight? Can't you figure it out yourself? You're clever, Will. It shouldn't be too hard.”

“I don't know Lecter like you do.”

“You will.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You two are inevitable,” she answered, “you are both too alike and too different at the same time. I cannot envision a universe where you wouldn't be drawn to one other.”

Her certainty stumped him, and he found himself unable to reply straight away. Managing to pull his voice from the depths of his unsure mind, he couldn't summon all that much to say. “I wouldn't say inevitable.”

“I would. He is utterly intrigued by you, Will Graham, and that doesn't happen to him often, if ever. Hannibal can be relentless when he wants to be, and you are now on the receiving end of his persistence.” She smirked. “Inevitable.”

“How is he so intrigued by me? He barely *knows* me,” he retorted, unable to prevent the inkling of pleased surprise making itself known at the back of his brain.

“He wants to. Almost desperately.”

Everything he knew about Lecter was swirling around in his head, making it hard to think. Apparently, Will had accidentally gained his interest. Unwanted or not, Will still *had* it, and there wasn't much he could do to make it go away while he was miles from the Cornucopia. A small part of him didn't want it to go away. He forced it down.

“And what if I don't want to know him?” he asked, challenging. Lecter wasn't here, but Chiyoh would undoubtedly tell him about their interaction.

“He will make you want it. And if he really feels like it, he will make you beg for it,” she retaliated, raising an appraising eyebrow, eyes flicking up and down his form. “But I doubt that will be the case with you. I think he sees you as more of an equal than an inferior.”

“I never *asked* to be Lecter's equal. I don't need his *approval*,” he countered, careful not to be too harsh. A crossbow was pointed at him, after all.

“And yet you have it,” she replied. Will had nothing to say to that, and she knew it, lips twitching with a restrained smile. “It's time I should be heading back, anyway.”

“It's night,” he said stupidly. “Why are you travelling at night? And we're miles from the Cornucopia. You won't get there until morning.”

“It's okay. I like the night. It's more than a period of time; it's another place. It's different from where we are during the day.” If he had been told this a week or so ago, he would have agreed. He always liked the night too. He never needed daylight to see someone, to *really* see them. But now, night was dangerous; it was deadly, so he could no longer agree.

“When life is most like a dream,” he added instead. She smiled back at him indulgently.

“Always,” she agreed, before taking a look around at the now completely darkened sky. “As entertaining as this conversation is, I'm afraid I must go now. Hannibal will be expecting me

back by morning.” She crouched down, swinging something over her shoulder and picking up her lantern with her free hand. With a start, Will saw that the mass over her shoulder was a dead animal. She noticed him staring. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Would you like something?” She jerked her shoulder, offering what looked to be the arm of a dead squirrel.

“No,” he replied, a disappointed frown twisting it's way onto his face. “I don't want your charity.”

Chiyoh laughed at him. “Boys,” she said. “So prideful.”

“You caught that squirrel. It belongs to *you*. Not me. You don't owe me anything, and I don't want anything from you,” he returned, stomach feeling horrifically empty as he did so.

“I suppose you're right. But maybe you should stay close to the river,” she suggested with forced nonchalance. “You might get lucky.”

“Thank you,” he said, nodding at her.

“Good luck, Will Graham,” she whispered.

“No goodbye?”

“No. I have a feeling that our paths will cross again. So I'll see you then.”

And then she turned, darted into the trees, and disappeared from sight. He watched the spot she had entered the trees from for a while, the minutes ticking on, until he finally sighed, reluctantly dragging his eyes away.

“Good luck to you too,” he murmured, even though she was long gone.

He understood why Lecter got along well with her. She really was remarkable.

Despite the darkness and his inability to see the compass, he pushed himself onwards, trudging alongside the river. It wasn't long until he realised he was shivering; he had been for some time. Chiyoh had distracted him. The arena tended to be pleasantly warm during the day, but when night came, he was almost chilled to the bone. It probably didn't help that his arms were exposed and his shirt wasn't thick- he could stop and put his jacket on so he could keep walking, but he decided against it. Chiyoh might be comfortable travelling at night, but that didn't mean he was. Too tired to even try to climb a tree, he squinted through the blackness until his eyes fell upon a small clump of bushes a few metres ahead, nestled between the trees. They were the only option he had. It wouldn't be long until the anthem played, but there would be no faces shown in the sky tonight. It was both a blessing and a curse. Fourteen tributes still alive, which meant fourteen threats to his and Bev's lives.

He couldn't think about that.

He just had to find her, and everything would be okay.

Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

another chapter without hannibal :(

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke early the next morning, feeling surprisingly well rested for his few hours of sleep. After stretching leisurely, he allowed himself a little to eat. His fruit wouldn't last much longer, and there was a serious possibility that starvation would kill him before he even reached Bev. But Chiyoh had given him advice about how to find food, so hopefully he wouldn't have to worry about it for much longer. The river didn't seem to contain any fish, if it did he'd happily have tried to fashion a fishing rod made of anything he could find. Maybe what Chiyoh was getting at was that the animals came to drink from the river, and there was a chance he'd see them. Either way, it was all he had.

Which turned out to be not much.

Time went quicker as his eyes scanned the tree line and river for any sign of life. There was nothing.

The day passed completely without incident; no cannons, no Bev, and no food. Eventually, as sunset began, he decided he had to do something other than walk, so after looking around cautiously, he stripped off and slid into the river. It wasn't like the cameras wouldn't show it- the Capitol was very comfortable with nudity, but what he had been doing all day was so mundane that it wasn't likely to be featured. Although... he'd only really been in the Capitol and the arena for just over a week, and he'd already heard several references to his looks. He wasn't exactly physically *repulsive*, so maybe the Capitol *would* show it. It didn't bother him as much as he thought it would. Maybe that had something to do with the fact that he could be killed any day now.

After a long, peaceful soak in the water, he laid back on the grassy bank. He draped his top over himself, where it covered him from his thighs to his abdomen. He needed some modesty, after all. Letting himself relax for a while, his thoughts drifted to Chiyoh. She would've made it back to the Cornucopia hours ago, and she would've already told Lecter about their conversation. He wondered what Lecter would think about it all.

He wondered why he was even thinking of Lecter in the first place.

It was a ridiculous fixation that he couldn't seem to rid himself of; the guy was *magnetic*. As it turned out, however, he seemed to be equally fascinated with Will as Will was with him. Perhaps Chiyoh was right about them being inevitable. He was bound to see Lecter in here.

He wanted to.

Was that so wrong?

Sharp pain in his hand snapped him out of his contemplation, and he looked down to see he had clenched his fist so hard that his fingernails had drawn blood. Sitting up, hissed at the

stinging as he swiped the blood away from the crescent marks on his palm. He had very nearly made himself bleed on his other hand, but since it was his left, he had managed to narrowly escape it. Groaning at the effort, he stood up and dressed, as quickly and efficiently as possible. He had to keep moving.

But moving wasn't doing anything.

He didn't seem to be getting *anywhere*, it all looked exactly the same to him, and he still hadn't come across Bev or any animals. He was regretting refusing Chiyoh now- his stomach felt like it was caving in. Damn his pride.

Will was still chastising himself when he finally settled down for the night. Again, he didn't have the energy to climb any trees, so he just repeated what he had done the night before, using his jacket as a pillow and covering himself and his blanket in as many leaves as he could. It was vital that he try to camouflage himself, especially as he didn't have the cover of the bushes this time round.

It wasn't like he'd ever lived a life of great comfort, but he'd always had a bed, at least. He was no stranger to going hungry, but it was never with constant exercise to accompany it. And soon, he wouldn't just be going hungry- he was almost halfway through Buddish's bottle of clean water. If it really came down to it, he'd probably end up having to drink potentially dirty river water. He'd do it if he had to. If it meant surviving for a little bit longer.

Huffing, he turned onto his side, grabbing a sleeve of his jacket and clutching it to his ear, feeling it curl around his head. In its pocket rested his beloved locket, his sister, her bluebell. Slipping a hand into the creases of the jacket, he swiped a thumb over the smooth surface of it, the gift granted by his mother to contain what, to him, was the most precious thing in the universe. If he shut his eyes tight enough, it was almost as if Abigail was here with him, her familiar, slumbering breath as real as the wind, soft breeze in his ears. It was comforting. Tiring.

Sleep was the one thing he had unlimited access to. He needed to make the most of it.

A pleasant haze came over his mind, dragging him down into the depths of darkness as his hands loosened around their respective posessions.

***

Will jerked awake, heart hammering, the sound of the cannon ringing in his ears.

It was pitch black. He couldn't have been asleep for more than a few hours- it was still the middle of the night. But someone had died again, and the cannon had woken him. Honestly, if they were going to make them fight to the death, the least the Gamemakers could do was let them get a good nights sleep. Could they not hold the cannon off until morning?

Apparently he had managed to sleep through the anthem, but his grip had slackened enough to let the sound of the cannon in. It was annoying, but really, what was stopping him from turning over and going back to sleep? Nothing. And yet...

Something was wrong. He was sure of it- he just didn't know what it was.

Screwing his eyes shut and clenching his fist around the locket with renewed vigour, he tried to ignore the prickly, ominous feeling overtaking him, but it was near impossible. He felt like he was being watched. That was preposterous, of course. If he was being watched, the person would've killed him by now. But it still felt like it.

Paranoia, as usual.

Sleep came easily; so did dreaming. Bloodlust danced across his mind, toxic and heavy, pulling him down, deeper and deeper into the murky depths of immorality. Damn him, but there was something alluring about the phantom feel of Buddish's fresh blood on his hands. The Games had already messed him up beyond belief and it'd only been four days. One day soon, he'd either be another dead, nameless tribute or a new addition to the freak show that was the victors of the Games. Well, it wasn't like he was the only one who hadn't killed. That *wanted* to kill.

***

Instead of startling awake like he had in the middle of the night, Will drifted pleasantly into consciousness, and took a few moments to blearily adjust to his surroundings, recalling why he had been so unsettled in the night. Because of a feeling? It seemed ridiculous now, but then it half felt like all of this was. He sighed, shuffling to a sitting position, leaning against the tree, and reached for his supplies, which were... Gone.

They were *gone*.

His water, his food, everything he had.

Tears of panic pricked his eyes as he scrambled to his feet- what was he supposed to do now? Someone had obviously stolen them, but since they hadn't killed him, he assumed they were long gone by now. There wouldn't be much point in stealing his things if they planned to come back later to kill him anyway. People in here didn't care about any petty damage they inflicted.

His jacket.

His locket.

Abigail.

A worn sob tore from his throat, contorting his expression in agony. How could he have been so foolish? Losing it, losing *her*. Forcing himself awake all night sounded better than this ugly, heavy loss and disappointment.

Tempted by the prospect of cold water rushing down his throat, he collected himself, pushing down his panic and starting to make his way back to the river. All he could do was stay alive, bluebells and blue eyes be damned. The walk to there seemed to be longer than he

remembered, but his memories were hazy- perhaps because he had been half-asleep. It couldn't be helped, he just had to get back on track, and...

Will froze.

There had been a noise, he was sure of it. The snap of a twig or the crunch of a leaf, something that indicated the presence of another person. Was it Chiyoh again? He hoped so, but that didn't seem to be the case. He was stood in a clearing, and there were definitely eyes on him from somewhere. But the person- animal?- wasn't doing anything. They were just watching. It felt malevolent.

“Well, Graham. Fancy seeing you here.”

Will spun on his heel to come face-to-face with Randall Tier, who was entirely too close for comfort. Taking a staggering step back, he noticed other people stood on either side of Tier. Two boys- it was Stammets and Boyle, he thought. And then he saw his pack on Boyle's shoulders. His arrows were also there, balanced precariously on Stammets' back. Slung around his waist, Will's jacket, a silver chain spooling from its pocket. Anger suddenly bloomed in him, righteous and fierce.

“You- it was *you*. You took my stuff,” he accused.

“Well, *yeah*. That's how a trade works,” Tier stated, tilting his head as he stared at Will. There was something behind his eyes that terrified Will, that had terrified him from the beginning, really- something unnerving, but dormant, for now. Something savage and hungry. Something inhuman.

“What are you talking about?”

“The trade I made. With these two. Your supplies and your weapons, for their help in trying to kill you.”

It sounded so detached. Although what could he really expect? It was the Games, after all. His chest tightened in pressing, urgent fear as he gazed at Tier in horror. The air felt crisp with tension.

Swallowing, he asked, “why me? Why now?” His voice was shaking. He was stalling.

“Why not?” Tier responded. “I think it's about time the amount of tributes started lessening.”

“You need three people to take down one tribute?”

“I was warned you'd be hard to kill.”

“Who told you *that?”*

Tier smirked at him, titling his head in consideration. After a pause, he finally answered, “Hannibal Lecter.” Of *course*. Will wasn't even surprised at these instances anymore. “He speaks highly of you. If this weren't the Hunger Games and he barely knew you, I'd say he was *fond*.”

“But it *is* the Hunger Games. He's not fond, he's *deluded*,” Will spat. “I got a *seven*. Hard to kill? *Please*.”

“I've come to trust Lecter over the last few days. He's been right about nearly everything else in this godforsaken place. But he certainly seems to see something in you that nobody else does.” Tier took another step forward, menacing, and Will was the faced with the reality that he was outnumbered three to one here, and there was a great possibility that he was truly about to *die*. “And even if you aren't hard to kill, what's the harm in gaining two more allies? It will make killing you all the more fun, after all.”

“Good point.” He swallowed.

Tier smirked, and lunged.

Will ducked, expecting it, and rolled under his outstretched arm, barrelling straight into Stammets' legs, sending him staggering backwards. Will had dragged him down to the ground and smashed his head into the thick roots of a tree by the time Tier spun and began advancing on him- Stammets was painfully weak, and clueless in a fight. Will wasn't exactly drastically better, but he knew enough about the theory of it to put it into practice. He heard a choking sound from the direction of Boyle, but could only ignore it as Tier threw his body weight against him, pinning him to the forest floor next to Stammets. He hissed in pain as nails dug into his neck and hands tightened around his windpipe, aiming to *kill,* and he gasped for air, Tier's gaunt face above him, teeth bared and eyes wild. He was an animal, truly- he reminded Will of a wolf that had finally pounced on its prey, taken over completely and utterly by instinct. It would have fascinated him if not for his rapidly declining access to air.

Will struggled under the pressure of Tier's body, until he finally managed to get his leg free enough to bring it up and knee Tier in the gut, forcing him to loosen his grip for a split second. Will snatched up the opportunity and brought his head up with all the force he could muster, smashing their foreheads together with an explosion of pain in his skull, sending Tier's neck snapping backwards. He fought his arm free and shoved Tier's momentarily vulnerable body to the ground below him, climbed over his torso, and swung his fist as hard as he could. He didn't give Tier a chance to fight back: he just kept going, driving his knuckles into Tier's face until blood was soaking through his fingers and Tier was twitching his way into death.

Will paused, ready to deliver a potential final blow, and Tier grinned up at him, teeth stained crimson. “See?” he said, and a flash of memories struck through Will's mind. Artificial wind rustled through his hair, the chill of it stinging his cheeks. He brought his hand down again, and knocked the grin right off Tier's face.

See?

The cannon sounded twice.

Will kept going, panting, palms weeping red. Then there was a warm hand at his elbow and he was up in an instant, fist flying round to strike. Lecter stopped his punch by swiftly grabbing his wrist in midair, sending Will to a hurtling stop.

“It's alright, Will. You can stop now,” he said, and everything about him, his smooth voice, his steady grasp, his dark eyes, it sent all of the air punching from Will's lungs, his hold on reality becoming clearer. “You can stop.”

“What did…?” He glanced around. Nicholas Boyle was lying on the ground a few feet away, clearly dead, his guts hanging out and tinting the greenery of the forest scarlet. Eldon Stammets was knocked out cold beside him, head trickling with a slight flow of blood, chest still rising and falling. But worst of all, there was Randall Tier. His face was a bloody pulp. His body was the carcass of a man who was no longer in there. Will almost swore he could see the indentations of his fists imprinted upon his cold, dead face. He looked away. “Did you kill Boyle?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lecter answered.

“Why?”

“You needed me to.” He gazed back at Will, defiant and steadfast in his quiet confrontation of the truth. Lecter was many things, and honest being one of them was a shock, considering they were supposed to be opponents. “Would you like me to take care of Stammets?” he asked when the silence stretched out even longer.

“I'll do it.”

Will walked over to Stammets' unconscious form, taking the risk of turning his back on Lecter as he plucked one of his arrows from Stammets' back and drove it through his chest, through protesting flesh and muscle and tendon, unrelenting, until he heard the cannon. Will stood over the body, feeling as if he should be experiencing some sort of guilt. But he didn't. He felt *calm*. The arena had changed him- not a few days ago he had accidentally killed Buddish, and was an absolute *mess*. He'd cried, he'd been sick, and his thoughts had been racing a mile a minute. But not now. He hadn't had a thought in his head as he hammered Tier's face into the ground and pushed an arrow through Stammets' heart. His mind was completely clear. His eyes were dry. His stomach was settled. This wasn't *right*- he knew, of course. He was still *aware* of himself, it was just… it felt different. It shouldn't, but it did.

Perhaps that was better. If Will was going to be murdering people, maybe it was best he didn't get into such a state about it. Was it the same for Lecter?

Lecter, who was determinedly patient and ever the hero. Swooping in and saving Will's life when he needed it, standing on the sidelines waiting to be his ally if need be. Will had originally had great trouble reading him, and he still did, really, but he knew one thing. This was not as it seemed. It was ridiculous, Lecter's actions that almost screamed protectiveness, and the apparent fixation he had on Will that everybody who came into contact with him seemed to pick up on. How come Will could never see it when they were together?

The entire situation screamed danger- Lecter was likely using him.

But still, waited. He waited as Will gathered his supplies back from the dead bodies. He waited as Will flung his pack over his shoulder and his arrows over the other. He waited as

Will shook out his jacket, hand closing around the steady comfort of all he had left of the most important thing in his world.

“Are you coming?” Lecter asked.

Will stared at the open and expectant expression on his face, and decided.

Chapter End Notes

he's here!!!!!!!!!!!!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lecter had been walking up ahead for hours, slashing away at the thick foliage with his sword. Everything had been the same since they first started walking- the same trees, the same colours, the same comfortable silence. The sun was bearing down on them, boiling, and Will watched beads of sweat trickle down the back of Lecter's neck, sticking to his smooth, bronzed skin, disappearing beneath the collar of his thin t-shirt. Will could see the broadness of his shoulders under the clothing, and could only imagine the perspiration running down the bare line of his back. Will kind of wanted to kiss it from his skin.

If they were anywhere but here, Will would've *wanted*.

But they *were* here. And he was tired and hungry and dirty. His throat was so dry he could barely swallow. He had no energy for petty desires. So he trudged onwards, following behind Lecter and diverting his eyes to the ground instead, watching himself manage to put one foot in front of the other, again and again, over and over.

“Will,” Lecter said, voice falling into the silence, and Will looked up to see he had stopped moving, and was staring back at him. “I think there's a clearing up ahead. Perhaps we should stop for a little while. You look as though you're about to collapse.”

Will nodded, too exhausted to protest. Lecter paused as Will caught up with him, and placed a hand on his lower back, guiding him into the clearing and over to a fallen log in the middle. The physical contact was a little weird, but Will was grateful for it when he was hit with a wave of dizziness while trying to sit down. Lecter sat next to him, tearing open his own pack and producing a bottle of water and some bread and berries, and Will was simply too hungry and thirsty to protest. He gulped the water so desperately it was audible, and wolfed down the food he was presented with.

Lecter watched him the whole time.

“Thank you,” Will muttered when he was done, needing to break the uneasy quiet. Lecter's appraising eyes didn't move from his face, seemingly tracking its every twitch and curve, drinking down his expression with a curious stare. “That was kind. I didn't mean to eat all of your food, I'm sorry.”

“You didn't eat it all. Even so, I gave it to you. You don't need to apologise.”

Will nodded, and a fraught hush fell upon them. The tension pulled tight between them, but it wasn't with hostility. There was some other great, unknown emotion hanging in the air between them, thick like smoke, and Will almost felt as if he was choking on it. Half-panicked, he coughed in awkward distress, mind grasping for something to say.

“The berries were okay, right? They weren't poisonous?” he asked, simply out of empty worry, and Lecter appeared bemused.

“Would I have given them to you if they were?”

“Maybe that's your way of killing me.”

“You think I couldn't do that without berries?” Lecter raised an eyebrow, and Will huffed in defeat, conceding. His mind still lingered on the food.

“Did you get the bread from sponsors?”

“Yes. I have connections back in District One, and apparently I've made quite the impression here in the Capitol. I'm not short of sponsors.” Will was intrigued by the way he spoke about it. There was no shame in his tone- but there wasn't pride either. It was simply matter-of-fact. Lecter paused. “Are you?”

“I've had a few sponsors. But not many. It's… not as easy. When you aren't rich.”

Lecter swallowed, and seemed to weigh his words. He seemed almost embarrassed when he spoke. “Back in District Four. Were you...”

“Poor?” Will finished for him. Lecter winced, but Will huffed it off, dismissive and unoffended. “Yeah. We got by, but yeah. We were poor. It sucked sometimes. Most of the time.” It was all he needed to say, really, but words were bubbling in his throat with molten frustration, overspilling. “My stomach would ache from hunger on a regular basis and I used to keep the same pair of shoes until the soles had nearly worn away. What you'd get for one meal in District One, which I assume barely covers one *course* here in the Capitol, we'd have to make last three people a week in my household.” Lecter looked shocked at Will's outburst of words, and even a little chagrined. “But, that said… it's home, you know?”

“I'm afraid I've never quite understood the human attachment to the concept of home,” Lecter replied with a sheepish smile. “It's not something I've ever really experienced.”

“You don't have a home?”

“I have a house,” he amended. “I wouldn't consider it *home*, though.”

“I guess it's not the house so much as it is the people. You build the concept around them. The rest- the attachment, the longing, it all comes after.”

“Who's your home?” Lecter actually seemed curious, leaning in as if to listen, and Will had already started, hadn't he?

“My mom. My sister. Beverly. To name a few.” He felt a rush of fondness towards them, spoiled only by the pang of homesickness that accompanied it. “They were my home. It wasn't perfect by a long shot, but it was still… *home*. I was *happy* there. It was my *life*. And the Capitol ripped it all away. They tore me away from my home and my family- and for *what?”* He knew this was dangerous territory, he knew he should stop talking, but he couldn't. He felt as if he'd been silent for weeks. No, not weeks- this didn't begin and end

with just the Games. It was more than that. It was the Districts: the elitist segregation, the wilful ignorance to their suffering. He'd been silent for *years*.

Lecter was watching again, *really* watching, rapt.

“So I could just be *entertainment* for them? I'm just something they could watch over a nice hot meal while the Districts starve and cry over their lost children,” Will snarled. “It's not *right*. I don't want to be here- breathing their air. Not this artificial shit in here and not their sickly, perfumed Capitol air out there. I want to go *home*. I want to breathe in sea salt and fresh air and I want to see my family. And that's something they'll never understand, for all their riches and possessions. They have furs and colours and extravagance, but without that, stripped down bare, what are they? Who are they? They're nobody. They're *nothing*. There's no substance. They're like goddamn clones of each other. Programmed to all be the same and look the same. They're disgusting.”

Will was nearly panting when he was done, the rage clogging his senses. Distantly, he knew he had just made a mistake. The Districts would probably love it, but the Capitol? Not so much. But he was too angry to care. Lecter's gaze rested on him still, and Will was too afraid to meet his eyes. Lecter reached down, and took Will's hands in his own, lifting them up until they were level with Will's chest.

His hands were warm.

“Of all the things I expected to come from entering the Games- be it power, wealth, status… you, Will… you are entirely unexpected,” he murmured. His voice was soft and close, and Will finally dragged his reluctant eyes up to fix upon Lecter's awed ones. “Your hands need mending.”

That explained the hand-holding. Will looked at his bloodied knuckles as Lecter fished in his pack for what he assumed was some sort of first-aid kit. He hadn't really felt it until now- as he'd been beating Tier into the ground he hadn't felt a *thing*, and the pain just hadn't really registered afterwards. He had beaten somebody to death. Here was his evidence.

“Was that an insult or a compliment?” he wondered aloud, and Lecter smiled, delicately wiping away the blood caked on his hands. Will braced himself for the usual evasiveness he received when Lecter answered his questions.

“A compliment. I either find myself entirely unimpressed by the unexpected, or not surprised at all. You have warranted neither reaction. You are completely new.”

“Oh. Um. Thanks?”

They returned to silence as Lecter bandaged his hands, focus directed on them instead of any potential conversation. Will tried not to think too hard on what his speech about the Capitol would do to his life expectancy. Hopefully they just wouldn't air it to the Districts- he might be able to avoid trouble then. But it was only a hope.

“Why are you doing this?” he blurted out. Lecter glanced up at him. “Helping me? Being my ally? You're not an idiot- you know what I'm trying to do in here.”

“You're trying to find Beverly Katz.”

“Exactly. I can't help you. And you aren't really going to want to wander around the arena searching for a tribute you don't know. You want to win.”

Lecter huffed a laugh. “I'm perfectly fine with doing that. Why wouldn't I be?”

“Is this just some technique to kill off more tributes or something? Get us all together? Like fish in a barrel?” Will narrowed his eyes, and Lecter just looked amused, finishing off the bandage with a smirk curling his mouth, mirth softening the sharp lines of his face.

“No. But helping you find your friend isn't a hardship- I can win later. Right now I'm with you. We had an agreement.”

Will remembered. It felt like an age ago; in reality it probably hadn't even been a week. But the Capitol with its neon lights and contagious hysteria was miles away from this quiet clearing in the middle of the arena, a place untouched by anyone else. A place of their own, for them and them alone.

“You're too good to me,” Will whispered, and Lecter looked up again, catching his gaze. Will couldn't look away. “Why?” he inquired, voice still quiet.

“You're just so…” Lecter trailed off, slightly dazed, seemingly at an uncharacteristic loss for words. He tore his eyes away and cleared his throat, dropping Will's hands and rising, almost unsteady on his feet. “It doesn't matter. Do you feel well enough to keep moving? We should cover as much ground as possible before sundown. Was it south you said earlier?”

“Yeah. We should keep moving.”

The atmosphere between them felt much more intimate than before. They walked side-by-side rather than single file, and sometimes Will would happen to glance over to Lecter to see that he was already looking back, and Will would actually *smile* at him, unable to stop himself from reverting to the polite social normalcies he was used to enacting with acquaintances. Perhaps it was due to his days of near-solitude, but Will felt especially chatty today, barely waiting a few minutes before launching into conversation once more.

“Lecter,” he began. “Where are the rest of the careers? Were you with them at the Cornocopia?”

“Some of them,” Lecter replied. “Chiyoh, Tier and I were there for a short while. We disbanded quite recently.”

“Tier wasn't a Career.”

“I know. I found him interesting, though. He was good in a fight.”

“What about the tributes from District Two?” Will felt slightly affronted at Lecter's comment about Tier being 'interesting'- he had assumed he was the only one to receive this sort of attention from Lecter.

“The girl was with us briefly. She left fairly early on to search for her male counterpart, however.”

“Budge, you mean.” Lecter made a vague noise of agreement. Will felt the need to probe. “Why wasn't he with you?”

“Irreconcilable differences.”

“*Lecter*.”

“You can call me Hannibal, you know,” he remarked loftily, and Will's scoff was the only answer to that. Lecter sighed. “I find him crude. We are similar in many ways, but as a tribute… I don't like him. I rejected him as an ally.”

“He's pretty angry about it,” Will offered, and Lecter turned to him in surprise, his walk slowing. “I saw him the first day in here. He was going on about how you thought you were better than him or something. It was pretty intense.”

“You talked to Tobias?” Lecter asked, and there was something sharp in his voice. “He didn't… try to kill you?”

“Oh, he did. I got away though. Just.”

“You 'got away' from *Tobias Budge?”*

“You don't have to sound so surprised about it,” Will grumbled, and Lecter had the grace to look apologetic. “I kind of stabbed an arrow through his leg. So I could outrun him. He was *really* mad.”

Lecter laughed, quite accidentally. It sounded *nice*.

“I expect he would be. Excruciating pain and all,” he said, and Will's mouth twitched into an involuntary smile.

“He, um.” Will stopped. Should he ask? It was probably a bad idea, but he had started now. “He said something to me. About how killing me would get back at you.” Lecter's expression was unreadable. “Or he implied it, at least,” he added hastily.

“Budge is more perceptive than I originally gave him credit for.” What did *that* mean? “It's no secret to you how I've wanted you as my ally since the beginning. Budge knew killing you would take that opportunity away from me. It would make me quite furious, I suppose.”

Yeah, so Will still didn't really get the ally thing. He scraped by in fights and occasionally made Lecter laugh. And now the boy was willing to wander around the arena searching for Beverly with him? His excuse was flimsy at *best*. Finding Will 'intriguing' didn't really explain putting his life on the line. But Will felt too embarrassed to keep asking.

“Well, let's just hope he doesn't catch up with us then.”

“I think you and I are more than a match for one boy. Even if he is well-trained.”

“He has Franklyn with him.”

Lecter made a choked noise of shock, more undignified than Will had ever heard him. “Why on *earth*…?”

“I think he's just… playing with him,” Will articulated terribly. “As in he's just waiting to kill him, exactly as he likes. I don't know, it's just an assumption.”

“A good one. Franklyn isn't exactly much opposition, at least.”

“True.”

Yet more hours passed. The sky began to darken as day shifted into twilight, and twilight crept into evening. Words were scarce between them as they walked, but Will couldn't deny that he wanted to talk. He hadn't had a real conversation with someone who wasn't about to kill him in *days*. And here was Lecter. Full of answers and questions and reactions. It was almost jarring. When they finally slowed to a stop for the night, choosing a small alcove beneath a tree to settle down in. Will dismissed Lecter's ridiculous suggestion of keeping watch- they both needed sleep and the alcove was hidden enough. Will had survived this long without someone keeping watch.

“You told Tier I'd be hard to kill,” Will whispered all of a sudden, as Lecter rifled through his pack for what Will assumed was probably a blanket or sleeping bag.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I wasn't wrong, was I?”

“Tell me why.” Lecter didn't say anything for a moment, so Will tried something else. “Please. Hannibal, please.”

He swallowed audibly, flicking his eyes up to meet Will's. That tension from the clearing was back, smouldering in the space between them. “I see you, Will.”

See?

“Elaborate.”

“In the Capitol. Your inability… it was all an act. A ruse. You're not inept. You're a survivor. And I believe you will survive this.”

“You're wrong,” he murmured.

“Perhaps,” came Lecter's quiet reply.

It wasn't long before they were both curled up together in Lecter's sleeping bag, Will's blanket over them, using their pack's for pillows. Will had felt a little uncomfortable about sharing a sleeping bag with a guy he'd met less than two weeks ago, but warmth and survival

had ended up taking priority once he'd reminded himself that he was in the Games, potentially seconds away from dying at any given moment. He was asleep within minutes, nodding off on Lecter's shoulder, dreaming his way into a fitful night of sleep.

Tier's face was there- what was left of it. Will watched it collapse in on itself all over again.

There was the sound Stammets made as he coughed his last breath.

Lecter's steady handling of his destroyed knuckles.

A bloody finger raised to a pair of bloody lips, a pair of dead eyes. Colourless skin and the movements of a killer.

"*See?*"

Chapter End Notes

i remember this chapter being sO fun to write so i hope you all enjoy it!!! please read the tags though: this is slow burn as hell

comments and kudos are appreciated <3

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will woke to the alluring scent of freshly cooked meat drifting down to the alcove.

He'd tangled himself up in the sleeping bag at some point, and Lecter was nowhere to be seen. Will suspected he may have something to do with the meat. Sighing, he slowly came to terms with the fact that his severely malnourished stomach took precedence over the desire to stay in bed a little longer, so he extricated himself from the hot confines of the sleeping bag and made his way out of the alcove, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he went. He'd slept *well*, far too well for someone in the Games. He'd completely missed the projections of the two boys he'd *murdered* because he was sleeping so well.

It was by far the best night of sleep he'd had since he entered the arena, and he'd spent it pressed up against Lecter's side.

Lecter, who was smiling over at him as he emerged into the sun.

“What meat is that?” he asked, strolling over to Lecter and squatting beside him, watching as he turned the remains of some poor animal over and over above a fire.

“Rabbit. It won't be long until it's cooked now. Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, I did. Thanks. For everything.”

“Don't mention it.”

They ate in silence, but it wasn't awkward. There was a sense of camaraderie now, one that Will had never really experienced the likes of before. Although, he supposed, he'd never really been in a situation like this before. No wonder it all felt so new. But still, it seemed as if his conversations with Lecter yesterday had really made an impact on their relationship. Will was glad. Despite the life or death situation, he found that he actually *liked* Lecter. Perhaps if they were anywhere but here, they would've been friends.

Lecter was an ally though, not a friend. And he could only *ever* be an ally.

He did make a rather good one- Will hadn't eaten properly in *days*, and now, having meat for what felt like the first time in forever… it was down to Lecter. *Lecter*. He was trained and resourceful and skilled and none of this made *sense*. The more Will thought about it, the less logical it seemed. And even if he temporarily believed the possibility that Lecter's desire to be his ally was entirely out of curiosity and altruism, his willingness to help look for Bev was still *ridiculous*.

Why would he? It was something Will just couldn't work out, however much he tried.

“Shall we keep heading south?” Lecter inquired when they finally finished eating. Will nodded.

It was ten minutes before they had packed all their things up and were on the move again. Ten minutes was already too long. He felt guilty, but he had barely thought about Beverly for the past day- Lecter was one hell of a distraction. But he had to get back on course now. She was alive, likely alone, and somewhere south. It was all he knew, but he had to work with it, he had to do *something*, because otherwise there was a very real possibility that he would never see her again. Never. She would die scared and alone on the other side of the arena because he didn't get to her in time.

It was a thought he couldn't bear.

But really, it was one he should probably consider. He had no idea how big the arena was- they could be walking for *weeks* before they got anywhere close, and if Beverly was walking around as well, then… they might never find her. There were eleven tributes left. There was every chance she could be killed off *today*, let alone at some vague time in the next few weeks. If only things were different.

He swallowed, painfully aware of the sudden lump in his throat. He prayed that Lecter wouldn't notice his sudden shift in mood, but apparently Lecter noticed *everything*.

“Are you alright, Will?”

“Fine,” he said, voice hoarser than he was expecting. He tried not to wince.

“Will.”

“I just...” He struggled to find the words. “What if we don't find her? What if we hear the cannon today and it ends up being her? What then?”

“We survive,” Lecter stated, matter-of-fact, as if it was something *obvious*.

“*I* don't. I *can't*. Not without her.”

“We'll find her, Will. I promise.”

But it was empty. Fake. There was no *guarantee*, Lecter could have no possible way of being sure they'd find her. It wasn't much comfort, but Will supposed he appreciated the gesture. He smiled weakly in Lecter's direction, head swimming with different ideas of the worst outcome.

He could die before he got to her, and never know her fate.

She could die, and then he'd never be able to recover.

He could get to her, and then they could both die.

Because that was the catch, wasn't it? Even if he did get to her, it could all mean nothing. It probably *would* mean nothing- two people couldn't win the games. He was destined to die,

somehow. And if by some miracle they both *did* get out, what then? Be the Capitol's playthings for the rest of their lives? Live with the reality and memory of the Games forever? There was no way out. No good option.

The weight of it was truly crushing.

“Why did you volunteer?” he found himself asking, working past the urge to cry.

“Why did *you?”* Lecter shot back.

“You know why. You listened to my interview.”

“That wasn't the real reason, surely?”

“Yes, it was, actually,” Will replied sourly. It had taken him a lot to share that memory with the Capitol. It was *his*. It was private. And he had exploited it to help him win.

Lecter looked surprised. “I'm sorry, I didn't realise. I simply assumed...”

“That I was lying like everybody else?” Will deflated. Who could blame him for thinking that, really? Most tributes lied in their interviews anyway. “Yeah. I get that. It's okay.”

There was a momentary lull in the conversation, and Will dreamt he could almost *hear* Lecter thinking, as they crunched over the forest floor, shoulder-to-shoulder, getting closer and closer to an uncertain future.

“I suppose I thought it would give me a sense of self-fulfilment.”

“Hm?”

“Volunteering.” *Oh*. “It was my way of… searching for meaning. For purpose.”

“That's… vague. But I think I get it. You really thought entering the *Games* would do that, though?”

“I thought it was worth a try,” Lecter admitted, almost sheepish, and Will laughed.

“No offence, but I think you've kind of made a mistake. What if you die? You won't find what you're looking for then.”

“Perhaps it was worth it,” Lecter suggested. “Perhaps the experience was enough fulfilment.”

“Yeah, right,” Will scoffed.

Lecter simply smiled, unaffected by his incredulity. They kept walking.

Will felt the heat of the forest increase as late morning moved on to midday, and cursed the Gamemakers in his mind. Did they really have to make the climate fall to such extremes? During the day it was sweltering and at night it was freezing. Will didn't know whether to be hot or cold half the time. It was tiring and repetitive, but natural disasters were something the

public *adored*, apparently. Watching twenty-four tributes fight to the death got a little mundane, according to them.

It was the sound of running water that made them finally stop walking, stopping short and listening out for its source.

“We must've strayed close to the river,” Lecter remarked. “Fancy a short break?”

Will paused, torn between finding Beverly and feeling clean.

“Just for a little while,” Lecter said softly, and Will huffed in defeat.

“Fine,” he acquiesced. “A little while.”

He tried not to look as Lecter peeled off his shirt when they got there, focusing on fumbling with the clips on his pack instead, pretending he hadn't seen the protrusions of his shoulder blades, like wings spreading across his back. Fitting- Lecter was something of a Guardian Angel, after all. At least he was to Will. One of the strings on the pack got tangled up in a clip as he fumbled around with it, distracted, hissing in pain as he almost got his finger caught. Only him. The clumsiest tribute to date.

“Here,” came Lecter's surprisingly close voice from beside him. “Let me help.”

He held his breath as a very shirtless Lecter placed a hand on is chest to steady him while his other hand went about untangling Will's pack. They finally got it off, and Will nodded his thanks, determinedly not looking up as he turned and stripped off his shirt. He rolled up his pants to his knees and sat on the riverbank, dangling his bare legs in blessedly cold water, sluicing it up his arms and onto his chest. There were still dried flakes of blood on him from yesterday.

He didn't know whether Lecter had stripped down completely, and he wasn't going to check. Perhaps he was a prude, but he felt slightly *awkward* about people he barely knew seeing him naked. And vice versa. The Capitol didn't, of course. He could scarcely imagine their delight at the homoerotic tension and near nakedness between him and Lecter. This scene would be playing for *ages*.

It was a while before he felt even fractionally clean, but Lecter didn't seem to be in a rush. *Will* was. The mere thought of Beverly somewhere in the arena had panic shooting through his veins all over again, and he elected to unsteadily climb to his feet and redress, despite his damp skin.

“You're ready to go?” Lecter asked from the river.

“Yeah,” Will responded, without looking round. “We should probably get in a few more miles today.”

He couldn't see if Lecter nodded affirmative, but the sound of rushing water being displaced as he left the river was answer enough.

A few minutes and they were back on track again, much cleaner and far more comfortable. The loss of time made him feel stressed, though, it had been *days* since he'd entered the arena and he'd barely heard anything about where Bev was, what she was doing or who she was with. Sure, Budge had given him the vague notion that she was somewhere south, but it really wasn't enough. The arena seemed *huge*. There were other areas of it, Will knew, but he'd been stuck in the forest since the very beginning. Perhaps it was better than being out in the open.

Will came to a very sudden stop due to Lecter's hand against his chest, urging him backwards. He frowned, and pulled his gaze up from the pointing down to look straight on. The ground they were standing on was raised; ahead, the forest floor dipped almost drastically into a deep ditch that stretched on nearly as far as he could see, as wide as it was long. The mud looked almost wet, and a lighter shade of brown than the rest of the forest. Maybe the ditch picked up more rainwater? Although... Will didn't remember it having rained here.

“What's the problem? Don't like getting muddy?” he questioned Lecter.

“No, I… it's probably nothing. Perhaps we should go around?” he suggested.

“*No*,” Will rejected vehemently. “That could take *hours*. We can go through.”

Lecter sighed. And relented.

Will sat on the edge of the ledge the ground made where it dipped, and used the muddy sides of the ditch to jump down to the bottom, wiping his hands on the fabric of his shirt afterwards. The ditch wasn't as deep as it looked- the height of it reached Will's chin. He turned to help Lecter, to find he was already next to him. The mud made a horrible sucking sound when they stepped onto it, and continued to do so the more steps they took. Will couldn't help his laughter.

“Will.”

“It *sounds* funny.”

Lecter shook his head, exasperated, but if Will saw right, a little amused too. Honestly, the guy needed to loosen up sometimes. But Will sort of liked him anyway, despite all that uptight refusal to take part in anything fun. He *did* have a sense of humour, as hidden and different as it was. His laughter died down pretty quick, and they made the rest of the trip in silence. It took a good while to even be able to see the end of the ditch, and it was then that it happened.

The ground began to shake. Ever-so-slightly. Almost unnoticeably. Will just thought he was getting a little unsteady on his feet at first.

And then the mud started to creep upwards. It was gradual, like the shaking, but Will began to realise that now the tips of his pants were getting muddy too, and they hadn't been before.

The ground had begun shaking and they were slowly sinking deeper into the mud. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

“Does something seem a little...” Will searched for the right words, “*off*, to you?”

“More than a little.”

All of a sudden the ground shaking didn't seem like much of a problem anymore- it shifted, abruptly and violently, throwing them to the ground and knocking the wind from Will's lungs. He fell on his side, and almost immediately he felt the pull of the mud, dragging his arm downwards, faster than he thought possible. He gasped in effort as he pulled it out, stumbling to his feet. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he did all he could to stay upright as he helped Lecter haul himself up, grabbing him by the elbow.

“What's happening?” he panted.

“I don't know, but I think we need to get back to higher ground,” Lecter replied breathlessly. The ground moved again, but they clutched at each other for balance, clinging to the one another to attempt to stay standing. “I think we need to run.”

“You're probably right,” Will said, and let go of him at the same time Lecter did.

He sprinted to where he could see the ledge leading to the raised ground, getting closer the faster he ran- the mud made it harder though, slowing the speed it took his legs to put one foot in front of the other, holding his feet in an even stronger grip the further he got. His calves *ached*. There was a roaring sound behind him, and he risked glancing around to see the ditch collapsing in on itself, its walls getting closer together but its ground getting deeper. Lecter was hot at his heels.

Another ten seconds and he was there, throwing himself against the ledge, scrabbling for purchase, scrambling up to safe ground. He was about to throw himself further back, just in case, but then he saw Lecter. His foot was caught. He was only a hairsbreadth away from Will, mere inches from reaching the ledge, but the mud was preventing him. He glanced up at Will with something like panic in his eyes; the ditch could only have been seconds away from closing up completely, potentially crushing Lecter in the process, and Will wanted more than anything to just run. Run away and survive and never have to worry about Hannibal Lecter again.

But Will didn't do that.

He threw a hand down, a lifeline, and Lecter grabbed it, using its leverage to free his foot. He tumbled forward, no longer stuck, and just as the ditch closed in behind him, leapt onto the ledge. Lecter pulled his feet up just in time as he fell onto the ground, Will collapsing with him, their bodies half draped across each other. They didn't say anything, and they didn't move, just lay there: gasping, breathless, alive.

Then Lecter started to laugh. He sounded so *young*, laughing openly and uncontrollably, and Will couldn't help but laugh with him.

“Let's not do that again,” Will breathed.

“I should hope not,” Lecter agreed, voice raspy. He paused. “You saved my life.”

“You've saved mine countless times before.”

“Yes, but I've never…” He trailed off. “Nobody has ever saved me before. I've never needed it.”

“This *is* the Games*,* Lecter. A bit different from everyday life. And it was my fault we were even *in* there, so don't go thanking me for saving you quite yet.”

“If we went around, it would've been something worse,” Lecter dismissed. “If we tried to escape a trap made by the Gamemakers, they would've just engineered something even more dangerous. Perhaps it was for the best.”

Will nodded. “Maybe we should get up now.”

Lecter groaned, sounding more childish than Will had ever heard him. “Maybe not.”

Will grinned, and Hannibal smiled back, not making any effort to get up or entangle their limbs from each other.

Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

i'm still kinda drunk as i post this so i hope the editing isn't too bad lmao. enjoy <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will really had tried not to like Hannibal. He really had.

But as the days in the arena stretched on and Hannibal remained his only company and only source of conversation, his trying really didn't mean a thing. Hannibal was kind and funny and he had saved Will's life so many times.

He wished things were different.

He wished he was back home with Abigail and Bev and that he had met Hannibal under different circumstances. Then they could actually be *friends*. But now, Will was guarded. He knew Hannibal would've loved to be more than just allies, but the idea of making a friend *here*, in the arena, while Beverly was somewhere out there all alone… It was absurd. He could never do that to her. And he hated himself for wanting to.

Because he did want to.

Hannibal would smile at him over dinner, and Will would smile right back.

Not that there was much in terms of dinner- between them they had polished off all their food within the space of a day. Will had only had dried fruit, and Hannibal a pack of crackers. Now they were relying entirely on potential sponsors, possibly getting lucky with an animal, and vegetation and berries that Hannibal assured weren't poisonous. Their food sources weren't exactly concrete, and it had been three days since the ditch incident now, two days since they ran out of food, and Will was fucking *starving*. He hadn't been able to sleep the previous night due to his growling stomach, so had resorted to drinking Buddish's sleep syrup that he'd found at the bottom of his pack to drift off. It was a good thing his heart had began aching for the bluebell, for his sister, as his hand had closed around the vial instead of the near-spherical shape of the locket. But he needed desperately to sleep. He barely had enough energy to stand up in the mornings, let alone walk for as long as daylight lasted, which was being extended by the Gamemakers for all he knew. Maybe they were trying to starve them out. It wasn't really unheard of in the Games.

“Do you need to stop?” Hannibal asked him at one point, noticing the sickly pallor of his skin and the sheen of sweat on his forehead. Will had been feeling rough since this morning.

“I'm fine,” he croaked.

“You're not.” Hannibal guided him over to the base of a tree, and helped him lower his body down to sit on one of the roots, back leaning against the trunk. A warm hand was pressed against his forehead and he shivered, a wave of ice shooting through his body. “You're burning up, Will.”

“But I'm *cold*.”

“You have a fever.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“I was training to be a doctor, you know,” Hannibal volunteered. “Before all this.”

“Why are you throwing it all away?” Will inquired.

“What makes you think I'm throwing it away?”

Will had nothing to say to that. Hannibal seemed fairly sure he was going to win, and the idea of him as the victor was certainly plausible. He could be ruthless when he wanted- Will hadn't forgotten what he'd done to the Boyle twins. He wondered if Hannibal was going to give him some sort of medicine as he searched through his bag for the first-aid kit, but he paused, frowning. Another shiver racked Will's body.

“Do you have medicine?”

“I do, but… I don't know what's causing the fever. Anywhere else I'd simply attempt to treat you, but now we're in the arena… this could be *anything* for all we know. It could make it worse.” Will groaned in annoyance. He was hungry and fatigued *anyway*, but now he felt hot and cold all over too, and even exercising his muscles slightly caused his head to go fuzzy. “Have you eaten anything different to me?”

“I've barely eaten at *all*.”

“*Will*.”

“No. Well, not really. I mean I had some sleep syrup last night, but...”

Hannibal was fumbling through Will's pack already, finding the vial of sleep syrup in record time and examining its contents. It was half-empty. Hannibal looked positively furious.

“You've had this for *days*, going stale, buried at the bottom of your pack, and you decided to drink *half of it* because you couldn't sleep?”

“Yes?” Will said timidly. It was more of a question, really.“I thought we'd be walking far! I didn't want to be tired!”

“It hasn't been stored in the right conditions, and you didn't need to drink this much. Now it's giving you a fever.”

“What do we do?”

“Nothing.” Hannibal sighed. “We don't do anything. I can't give you any medicine because it could interfere with the syrup. We can only wait it out.”

Will wanted to complain. He really did. But he was half-delirious and minutes from passing out. So he just allowed Hannibal to push him down to a horizontal position, cushioning his head with a pack and draping a blanket over him. It didn't take long to fall asleep, then, to fall into the quiet reserve he'd been denied.

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When he woke, it was early evening. He blinked awake, still heavy with tiredness, and pushed himself up to sit. His head swam, and through his blurry vision he could see Hannibal sitting opposite him a few metres away, watching him. He rubbed his eyes to clear his sight, and attempted a weak smile in the direction of Hannibal.

“How long was I out?”

“Around six hours. You'll probably need several more in a little while.”

Will nodded. It was quiet, and the sky was darkening. The atmosphere felt expectant, like it was waiting for something to happen, for someone to say something. He gave in.

“A doctor?” he prompted.

“A doctor,” Hannibal confirmed. “I started training a few months before the Games.”

“So… you're eighteen, then? This year was your last chance to volunteer?” Hannibal nodded. “Why leave it so late?”

“I suppose I always kept it as an option, just in case I got bored. This year I took it.” *In case I got bored.* Hannibal Lecter really was something special. Who *said* that? In fact, who *did* that? Volunteer for the Games just because they were bored with their life? The reasoning was *insane*. Will was starting to think that Hannibal was as well, just a little bit. “Did you have a job in mind back home? I suppose you weren't planning to enter the Games.”

“I don't know. Maybe fishing? I still had *years* to choose though.” He found that he was already speaking in the past tense in reference to his life. It really felt as if he would never go back. It was likely he wouldn't. “It's a shame.”

“What is?”

“That I'll never get to.”

“Don't be so sure, Will.” He was about to protest, to call Hannibal *ridiculous* and tell him it was *impossible*, but he didn't get to. “Please, don't lose all hope. Things have a way of working themselves out.”

Will huffed. “I think you're being too optimistic.”

Hannibal shot him a glare, but there was no real malice behind it. “How many years left of school do you have left?”

“Two.”

“Hm. Sixteen. That was a good age for me.”

“Lecter, are you making *small talk?”* Will accused, and in the light of twilight he swore he saw Hannibal flush. Will laughed, and they fell back into companionable silence.

See, the thing with the name. Will couldn't stop himself from thinking of Hannibal as just *Hannibal*, now, but he still called him Lecter. After their close brush with death in the ditch, it felt as if they were almost friends- they got on incredibly well, and their dynamic was drastically different from what it had been when they first met. But… Will couldn't quite *accept* it. Yes, he wanted to think of Hannibal as a friend, but it didn't mean he *was* one. It was just too risky. He couldn't bear it if he came to care about another person in the arena, then he'd want *three* people to win the Games, which was so far from the realm of possibility that it almost made him laugh aloud. It would *never happen*. It *could* never happen. He didn't even want to entertain the notion. He may have thought of Hannibal one way, but he couldn't allow himself to slip into showing it too. It would make it all to real.

“How long until this wears off?” Will asked, after they hadn't spoke for a while, breaking their silent reverie.

“It would stay in your system a little over a day, I imagine. You should be alright tomorrow morning.” Will nodded, and Lecter sighed. “You really are a fool, you know,” he said loftily. “To drink half a vial is *one* thing, *that* would just knock you out, but to drink it when it isn't *fresh*...”

“I didn't *know*. We're a fairly healthy District on a whole, so I never saw it around much. I just assumed. I made a mistake.”

“I know,” he said, exasperation caught in his tone. “I just can't figure out why it would be in a pack, is all. It's far more like a sponsor gift.”

Will felt a pang of guilt.

“Oh, I- don't know,” he forced out, and Hannibal frowned at his hesitation. “It probably was. It, um. It wasn't mine.”

“Who's was it?” Hannibal asked. His voice was soft.

“Do you remember Buddish? District Six?” Will asked, and Hannibal made a noise of assent. “It's his.”

“How did you get it?”

Will shut his eyes. “I killed him.”

He heard Hannibal exhale all in a rush, as if he'd been holding his breath. Will was too afraid to open his eyes, which were clenched shut tightly. His hands were balled into fists at his sides. It was jarring, remembering Buddish. It felt as if the dead boy hadn't crossed his mind in days, which was so *wrong*. It was so wrong of him to forget and brush it off. Buddish had

been a person with a family and a life, and now he was gone. Because of Will. And Will didn't seem to care at all.

“Will,” Hannibal breathed. “Oh, Will. You really are like nobody I've ever known.”

He opened his eyes and looked over at Hannibal, who was gazing at him with such an expression of shock and awe that nothing else seemed to matter anymore.

“Why? Because I killed someone? The majority of people in here have.”

“It's not that,” Hannibal murmured. “It's… You don't know how to feel about it. You really don't.”

He didn't elaborate, and Will didn't ask him to. It wasn't unusual for Hannibal to say things that Will didn't understand, and it was mostly either due to his extensive vocabulary or determined commitment to vagueness. This time, it was the latter. He'd often ask for an explanation, but this time… he wasn't sure he wanted to know what Hannibal meant. There was a wonder there, and a respect. And something else that he couldn't quite deduce. Again, he didn't really want to.

“How many people have you killed?” Hannibal asked, and Will choked in surprise.

“Why do you ask?”

“I'm simply curious.”

“Three. Buddish, Tier and Stammets. How many people have *you* killed?”

“A fair few.” There was a pause. Some leaves on the ground shifted and fluttered away as a gust of wind blew past them. Will waited. “Six,” he answered finally.

“Who?”

“The twins from District Three. The boy from Eight.”

“And the other three?”

“You wouldn't know them.”

Cold horror shot through Will. Did that mean they weren't tributes? Had Hannibal killed before the Games? It seemed to be the only interpretation of what he'd said- what else could it mean? Hannibal was a murderer. A real murderer. One that hadn't been moulded by the Hunger Games into someone who had to kill to survive. He was someone who killed for sport.

Will wanted to run.

But… there was a part of him saying that maybe, just *maybe*, there was more to this than what he first thought. Hannibal was being vague, really. Again. But he was doing it on purpose- he could be rushing to explain why he'd killed before the Games at the moment, but

he wasn't. There had been no reason for him to share such information in the *first place*, and he wasn't acting as if it had slipped out by mistake. He was just watching Will react. And that didn't seem right. Perhaps it was a test; a test to see whether he'd run or not. Maybe Hannibal's murders had been self defence. Maybe they'd been justified. Maybe they'd been forced- who knew how Careers got trained? Maybe his confession of this wasn't supposed to be taken at face value.

“Are you going to expand on that?” Will asked eventually.

Hannibal smiled. “Should I?”

“You did just kind of admit you've killed people. People who aren't tributes.”

“I did.”

Will couldn't help it, he grinned. Hannibal was such an *asshole*. He rarely gave proper answers to the questions Will asked, and even *now*, at *this*, he was acting like it wasn't a big deal. Like it was Will asking why he was helping him train, all those days ago in the Capitol, when they met for the very first time. It was one thing to be evasive then. But now…

Hannibal was grinning back, and a full grin was a rare thing with him, and all of a sudden it didn't really matter. Whatever Hannibal had done in the past didn't matter. Will didn't care. This was *now*. They were in the arena, fighting for their lives, and in a few days one of them could be dead. One of them probably *would* be dead. It could even end up being both of them. He had to work out how to survive in here for as long as possible and Hannibal certainly seemed to be helping with that, so Will decided that he *didn't care.*

Night had started to fall, and Will's head was beginning to feel a little woozy again. He'd be falling asleep again soon, he could feel it.

“Did anyone die today?” he wondered aloud, and his voice sounded slurred and sleepy even to him.

“Three people.”

It could be Bev.

The anthem came within the hour. Will had been straining to stay awake, desperate to see it, the fear keeping him awake just long enough to watch the projection of the dead tributes. The first face came up, and the world fell apart.

It wasn't Beverly.

It was Chiyoh.

Will couldn't believe it. He watched numbly as the faces of the girls from District 2 and 11 came up, and felt a sting in his heart for Hannibal. Hannibal, who was staring up at the sky with the face of a man who couldn't care less. Will frowned.

“I'm sorry,” he offered.

“Why?”

“She was your friend, wasn't she?”

“We were close, I suppose,” Hannibal admitted. “And I shall miss her. But everyone dies. I had prepared for this inevitability before I entered the Games- we were both volunteering. I know that in order for me to win, she had to die. It's for the best.”

It sounded like he was trying to rationalise it, really. Perhaps what he was saying was true, and considering it was *Hannibal*, there was a strong possibility it was. But to Will, it just sounded like the ramblings of a man trying to rationalise the means for the death of someone he had loved very deeply.

“Still, I'm sorry. If I'd lost Bev...”

“It isn't the same,” Hannibal said stiffly. “You two are practically co-dependent. Chiyoh and I were not.”

Will tried not to be offended. Hannibal was grieving, and striking out.

“It's okay to be sad.”

Hannibal very nearly rolled his eyes. “You should get some more sleep. I think I will too.”

They didn't say anything as Hannibal arranged the sleeping bag and let Will climb in beside him. They didn't say anything as they clung to one another for warmth as the night wore on, and the temperature dropped rapidly. They didn't say anything until the next morning as they packed away their supplies and prepared to move on.

The side effects of the stale sleeping syrup had evidently worn off throughout the night, and Will felt much more well-rested after his day of on-and-off sleeping. Perhaps it had been for the best overall. He threw glances at Hannibal through his eyelashes, nervous, uncertain on whether or not he was going to snap or breakdown. That was what Will *expected*, anyway. He had just lost a friend. But there was absolutely none of that. Hannibal was just as no-nonsense and matter-of-fact as usual. It was almost disturbing.

“You think I'm being foolish,” Hannibal remarked suddenly, as he rolled up the sleeping bag to shove into his pack.

“Yeah, a little,” Will confessed. “But who am I to judge how you mourn? I don't know, I just… you're different to anyone I've ever met. In so many ways.”

“You did call me deluded once,” Hannibal reminded, a joking justification, but something about it struck Will as odd.

“When?”

“Hm?”

“When did I call you deluded?”

“A few days ago. To Tier.”

Will remembered. Except… that was *before*. He attempted to work it out, to add it all up, but only one explanation fit. An explanation that he longed to be false.

“That was before,” he repeated, aloud this time. “That was *before* he attacked me. Were you… were you *already there?*” he questioned, and by the look on Hannibal's surprised face, the answer was clear. Enraged, Will continued. “It was *obvious* he was going to attack me. Why didn't you intervene?”

“I… I wanted to see.”

“You wanted to see *what?* How I'd *react?* How I'd *fight?”* Will was almost shouting now. Hannibal swallowed. “What was it?”

“Both. I knew Tier would be the right person to get me that information.”

Will felt stock still, his anger white-hot and furious, a rushing river in his veins. It had been Hannibal. *God*, it had been Hannibal the entire time. He had assumed that Tier had just decided to leave the Cornocopia and the Careers and along the way decided he wanted Will dead. He had assumed Hannibal had arrived by coincidence, just in time to kill Boyle and stop Will from destroying Tier's face completely. But it hadn't been that at all. He'd already been there. He was waiting for it. Watching it. It had been Hannibal all along. *His* Hannibal, his ally, his almost-friend. His so-called *saviour*.

“You sent him,” he whispered. There was horror in his voice. Hannibal very nearly recoiled. “You sent Tier to kill me. *Just* so you could see me fight, and then swoop in and save me. It was *sport* to you.”

“That isn't it at all,” Hannibal insisted.

“How *dare* you!” Will shouted. “How *dare* you pretend to give a shit about me! You *don't*. God, you *asshole*. I can't *believe* this.”

“I just sent him so he would *track* you, he was far better at it than I am,” Hannibal said, the words tumbling from his mouth in a rush. If this weren't Hannibal Lecter, Will would've said he was *babbling*. “But when I got there… I just wanted to *see*. I was *interested*. I never would've let him hurt you.”

“Oh, so it wasn't premeditated? That makes it all *fine*,” Will snapped, hauling his pack up onto his back and storming past Hannibal, heading south.

“Will, *please*,” he heard shouted after him. He kept his head down and waited as Hannibal caught up with him, falling into step. “Is this the end of our alliance?” he asked. Will thought he actually detected *nerves* in his voice.

“I didn't say that.” Hannibal exhaled. It could've been relief, but Will honestly didn't *care* anymore. “But we're just allies. I'm using you to stay alive. Don't forget that.”

Nothing else was said on the matter.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy!!!! Kudos and/or comments are appreciated :)

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> WARNING: attempted rape in this chapter. Please don't read if it's a trigger for you, stay safe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was betrayal, plain and simple. And it *hurt*.

Will only communicated with Hannibal when he absolutely had to, and ignored all of his efforts to make amends. The day passed in silence from his end, and Hannibal eventually stopped trying. Will was sort of glad for it, really- with his specification that they were just allies and that there was no form of friendship between them whatsoever, he felt as if there had been a clean split between them. Now, all he had to do was resist Hannibal's dark, reproachful eyes, and he'd be fine. He'd be detached. And he wouldn't feel it if Hannibal died.

That was for the best, now.

If Will had counted right, this was the tenth day in the arena. He had spent half of it with Hannibal. It wasn't his fault for getting attached; this was an experience, a *terrifying* experience, that he was sharing with another human being. Having that was one of the only reasons he'd more or less maintained his mental state in here, but it also presented him with the dilemma of how he was going to *win*. He wanted Bev out too, which was already too much to ask. Wanting Hannibal alive as well was a step too far. But it didn't need to be anymore. He didn't have to care for Hannibal or his fate. He just had to use him to stay alive long enough to reunite with Bev.

Hopefully, that wouldn't take much longer. There were only eight tributes left, and Beverly was amongst them. As the number of tributes dwindled, and the days stretched on, it was becoming more likely that the Gamemakers would resort to other tactics to manipulate the arena and push them all together- the public did love their finales. The perfect finish to the Games was exactly what they wanted. Will didn't know how long that would be, though. It could be days. It could be hours. It really all depended on public response.

“Should we stop for the night?” Hannibal asked, and Will looked up at the darkening sky. Clouds were beginning to form, quite heavily, and the moon was beginning to peek out from behind them. He hoped it wouldn't rain.

At his nod of affirmation, their press onwards became much more focused on finding a place of shelter rather than covering distance, and they finally came across a small den, evidently man-made, created with branches and leaves, nestled amongst some bushes, almost invisible to passer-bys. Their finding it had been a stroke of luck.

“Whoever made it left a long while ago,” Hannibal observed, prodding his foot at a charred pile of firewood on the ground a few metres from the den. It hadn't been burned recently. “It should be safe to stay here tonight.”

Will hummed in agreement, and Hannibal let his eyes rest on him, weary and guilty. His mouth twitched as if he were to speak again, likely to apologise, but he had done it countless times today, and instead appeared to change his mind. Apologies didn't mean anything. They were just empty words.

“I'll go and get some fresh firewood,” he said instead. “This place seems hidden enough that we can risk it.”

Hannibal slunk off into the night, and Will sighed, dropping his pack to the ground. He hated how it was between them. But finding out, after *everything*, that Hannibal had thought of him in such a disposable manner… even if it was in the past, it didn't make it okay. At all. Hannibal had tempted Tier, goaded him into going after Will, just so he could follow behind and figure out where Will was in the arena. And maybe, after some time, Will could've forgiven that. It was reckless, but it had good intentions. But that *wasn't* what had happened. Hannibal had followed Tier, found Will, and then he had just *let it happen*. Which wasn't *right*. It wasn't forgiveable.

Will rubbed his hands together, and watched his breath come out in a visible puff of air. It was freezing, and he was starting to feel droplets of rain falling down lightly, spattering upon his skin. By the time Hannibal got back with enough firewood, starting a fire would probably be impossible. So much for keeping warm.

It was then that he heard a scream in the distance, and his head shot round.

It was somewhere vaguely in the direction behind the den, and it was distinctly a female scream. His heart dropped. There weren't many girls left at all- there was every chance that was Beverly, being brutally murdered as he stood around, indecisive, unable to choose whether or not to go and check. He tore open his pack and snatched up his knife, stumbling towards the source of the sound. It was only a little ways away, but the scream had sounded further, likely due to the odd echoes of the forest. It was due to this reason, combined with his desperation to potentially protect Bev, that he burst straight out into the clearing without a second thought.

Matthew Brown's head whipped round at the sound of his heavy footfalls, and pinned Will with his gaze. He had Eva, the girl from his District, trapped up against a tree, one hand at her throat and the other at her waist. She was struggling to get away. It was raining quite steadily now, and her red hair was half stuck to her face, weighed down with rainwater. She was soaked to the skin, and shivering. With fear or coldness, Will couldn't tell. Her shirt was half torn open, likely from Brown's brutality, and Will felt an enormous pang of pity for her.

“Matthew, please,” she begged. “My brothers are all watching.”

Brown smirked, still looking at Will. “I don't care,” he said, and in one short movement he had pulled something sharp from his pocket and slit her throat.

He hadn't even looked at her.

Blood spurted from her throat, long strings of crimson gone black, and Will made and abortive step forward to help. It only took him further into the clearing. More exposed. More vulnerable. Brown grinned, predatory, and the light of the moon made him look other-worldly, reflecting blue and white on his skin, dark shine.

“Will Graham,” he purred. “Now *you*… You're more my taste. More than she was, anyway.”

Will didn't understand. He tried to take a step back but his feet felt frozen, and panic built up in him as Brown swaggered toward him. He was in front of him now, so close Will could feel his breath on his face, stale and steady. This wasn't the same as anyone else who'd attacked Will. This wasn't the *same*.

“You're so very *pretty*, you know?” Brown murmured, a hand coming up to tug at one of Will's curls, drifting down to stroke his cheek.

Will considered it. Brown was naturally more slender than Will, but he was still stronger. And considering Will hadn't eaten properly in over a week, there was no chance he would be able to emerge victorious if he attempted to fight him off. He was aware of what was about to happen now, really. He just didn't want to admit it to himself. Rainwater fell on his face. He shut his eyes. His breath caught.

Brown shoved him to the forest floor, and Will hit the ground with a thump and a short huff, expelled from his lungs at the sudden force of it. As Brown climbed on top of him, the rain continued.

“Please,” he said, as Brown pressed his mouth against Will's neck. He opened his eyes to stare up at the moon, tears blurring his vision. “Don't. Please.”

Action eventually clicked in him. He brought a hand up to push Brown away, but his wrist was caught before it reached its target, and his other wrist pinned down against the ground. Defeat bloomed in him, and he whimpered. Brown chuckled against his skin, and Will wanted to be sick. He pulled one of Will's hands down, trapping it with his knee so he could use his own free hand to pull Will's head back by the hair. Thunder crashed in the sky above them, and lightening flashed, illuminating Brown's face. His eyes were hungry, his teeth were bared. He was animal, but not in the way Tier had been.

He was animal in the way that some men just *were*.

Animal in the way all men were.

Animal in the way that rape was.

Something raw and vicious and savage. Something not human.

He forced his lips against Will's unwilling ones, and Will tried to squirm away, turning his head to the side, but Brown just yanked him back into place with the fist he had knotted in his hair. When his lips came back Will didn't think, just bit down as hard as he could, as he

struggled to free his hands from the tight grasp Brown held them in. Brown hissed in pain, but laughed harder against Will's mouth, tugging his hair and making him wince.

“Don't make this harder than it has to be,” he said, voice a hollow whisper that Will knew would haunt him forever, if by some miracle he survived this. Brown would likely rape him and kill him straight afterwards. And he would be just another discarded tribute.

Brown moved his mouth back down to Will's neck, and pulled the hand he had tangled in his hair away so he could push it under Will's shirt instead. He felt a shock of cold as Brown's hand touched his bare waist, nails digging into his skin. It hurt. It all hurt. He distantly noted that his tears had spilled from his eyes, and were running down his cheeks.

He thought of Abigail. His little sister. *Watching* this as it unfolded. He now understood Eva's plea about her brothers- she had understood what he was about to do, and she hadn't wanted them to see. Will could relate all too well, now. It wasn't like watching him get attacked- this was deeper, darker; something that only came from real evil. He willed her to look away.

Brown's hand drifted down to his thigh. Will struggled harder.

Rape wasn't something that often occurred in the Games. At least, it never had in Will's lifetime. The majority of tributes were only just discovering sexual desire, and when they were thrown into the arena it just didn't seem to matter all that much anymore. The ones that were old enough to care managed to ignore it just fine. There were stories of tributes having *sex,* of course- not many, but it had happened. But rape… Will only remembered that there had been a scandal in the last Quarter Quell about it. That was all. He'd just be remembered as a scandal in an unimportant Games.

“Stop moving,” Brown growled, and Will shook his head.

“Please,” he choked out. “Please don't.”

He didn't know what Brown would've said or done, and he didn't really want to. He was simply relieved that Hannibal Lecter happened to be a person who cared about him.

Weight above him was suddenly and quickly displaced, tumbling sideways, and it took him a moment to realise Brown wasn't on top of him any longer, that he'd been tackled off by somebody else. Hannibal was straddling Brown beside him, hands locked tight around his neck, an iron-grip that was restricting his breathing. Will imagined it was akin to the way he'd looked beating Tier to a pulp. Did everybody look so savage when they fought? He supposed they probably did, as violence was something primitive that most humans chose not to do. Teeth became bared, eyes became dazed. When fighting, people became predators. But with Hannibal… it wasn't predatory. It was *protective*. Right now, at least.

Will would've dwelt on that if he didn't feel so numb.

He watched Brown's face turn red and purple beneath Hannibal's locked hands. His breathing was ragged and his eyes were wild. Will didn't know whether to be afraid or not.

His heart was heavy in his chest as he pushed up on shaky arms to sit up. His hands were trembling. His whole *body* was trembling. Brown had got to him in a way that nobody else could, in a way that was guaranteed to get to *everyone*. It felt surreal. *I was almost raped,* he thought distantly, closing his eyes. It didn't feel like his thought. Will brought his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them and hooking his hands together. Phantom handprints clutched at his waist. Lips ghosted across his. Eyes clenched shut, he listened to the sound of Brown's lungs collapsing under Hannibal's unmoving grip. This wasn't real. How could this be real?

The cannon went off. The sound of choked breaths stopped, but Hannibal didn't move.

Will peeled open his eyes to see Hannibal sitting there on top of Brown, panting, flecks of blood on his lip where he'd bitten clean through it, staring down at Brown with undisguised fury and disgust. He seemed to be giving it off in waves. Will wondered if Hannibal had forgotten he was even there, sitting right next to this, watching it. He couldn't have moved even if he wanted to.

*I was almost **raped**.*

A sob clawed its way from his throat, and Hannibal's head snapped up. He had clambered off Brown in an instant, and was in front of Will before he took his next breath, entirely too close, all at once. One of his warm hands cupped Will's cheek and the other went to his waist, exactly where Brown's had been.

“Did he hurt you?” Hannibal asked desperately, roughly tilting Will's chin up so he could see better. “*Did he hurt you.”*

“No,” Will croaked out. It was all he could say as tears slipped from his eyes. Hannibal visibly deflated, and softened as he looked at him, eyes glistening in what Will could only assume was sympathy.

“Oh, *Will,”* he said, and enveloped him in his arms, resting his chin atop Will's head. Will could do nothing but clutch him back and weep into his chest. Rain bore down on them.

He wanted to go *home*. Everything felt utterly ruined, like nothing would ever be okay again. Brown had *touched* him, had pushed him down and nearly gotten everything he wanted, and Will had been powerless to stop him. Without Hannibal, he would've been brutally raped on camera for his family to see. His whole District. Everybody who had ever known him. He didn't want to move his face from Hannibal's chest, he wanted to hide there forever. This wasn't the same as getting attacked by Budge or Buddish or Tier.

This *wasn't the same.*

“He's never going to touch you again,” Hannibal whispered into his hair, holding him to his chest in an odd mixture of delicacy and desperation. Holding him like he was some beautiful, precious thing.

Will held him back, his anchor in the storm that raged around them.

Chapter End Notes

this wasn't a fun chapter to write, and i'm assuming it wasn't a fun chapter to read. I might put out the next chapter sooner to cheer up the story a bit (not that it was happy before lmao)

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once, when Abigail had been seven, she'd got sick.

Really sick.

That kind of sick that lasts for weeks, that's a fevered haze of sweat and vomit and heat. The doctors in the District did all they could, but her condition didn't improve, and one day, it had dipped drastically. The doctors had told Will and his mother that she probably wouldn't make it through the night, and Will had quite honestly believed them- from the way she was looking: passed out, pale and clammy, it wasn't going to be much longer. His mother had fallen at her bedside and wept. He had turned and left.

He'd walked. He'd kept walking until he got to the river, and then he'd jumped, fully clothed and unprepared for the freezing temperature of the water.

In all his years, he had never been so cold.

The sharp icy water had gone through him straight away, and it had felt like he was being *skinned*; the sudden, shocking *rawness* of it had felt like it had penetrated through him all the way to his organs. His lungs felt cold. So did his heart.

Under the water, he'd looked up. During the day he would've seen sunlight, filtering through the water in crystalline patterns he could still see when he shut his eyes, sometimes. But then, on that terribly cold and terribly dark night, it had just been a wobbling, murky blackness. He'd stayed down there until his lungs felt as if they were going to burst, forcing his eyes to stay open, looking up at the surface of the river- a beautiful nothing. He'd wondered if that was what death was like.

When he'd emerged, air ripped into him so violently he thought his chest would explode. It hadn't. He'd gasped in much-needed oxygen, treading water, attempting desperately not to allow his mind to stray to his little sister, dying in her bed. If she'd been conscious, she would've been scared. He knew that about her. He knew so much about her. He knew that she loved animals and that she hated the water and that he was her favourite person in the whole wide world. He knew that he loved her more than he could put into words.

He had cried, then.

Just crawled up onto the riverbank, put his head in his hands, and cried. It was the first time he'd cried since his father died, two years previous. Life had sort of felt numb since then. Like he was walking around in a daze, half-asleep, and he didn't quite know how to wake up. *He* hadn't been the same. Nobody had been the same- not from his perspective.

He'd thought about his father's lonely death, out there on the sea. He hadn't been *alone*- Beverly's father had been with him, and a whole crew of men. But it was still *lonely*. The sea was lonely. Trawling and toiling, endlessly, all that way away; it had been their lives. Will had asked him why he didn't just sail all the way away once. Anywhere would be better than here.

“Where's anywhere?” his father had asked, smiling, making his eyes twinkle and the lines on his face crease up. Will had been stumped. “Anywhere is nowhere. You, your mom and your sister wouldn't be there, wherever *anywhere* is. Therefore making it nowhere. Nowhere *I* want to be.”

“You could take us with you.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere.”

“Where's anywhere?” he'd asked again. “There's a whole big world out there, Will. Past all that ocean. Be careful you don't get ahead of yourself. You might get lost.”

Anywhere was nowhere without his family. He was anywhere at the river while his sister died at home. He was nowhere.

Guilt weighing him down at his decision to briefly run away, he'd trudged home, tears wetting his cheeks and heart heavy, expecting the worst. But she'd been sitting up. Sitting up in her bed, smiling like it was nobody's business, colour in her cheeks and a new sparkle in her eye. Good as new. All fixed up. A miracle recovery. Will had never stopped being grateful.

He thought of it now, curled up against Hannibal's chest in the sleeping bag, dawn's dim light creping into the den. He'd slept, but only a little. His dreams had been all hands and lips and brutality. He never wanted to dream again.

“We should get up,” Hannibal whispered into the quiet of the morning. “We should go.”

“Where?”

“East. West. I don't know. I don't mind. Just not here,” he murmured. “Anywhere.”

Will smiled, sleepy and mournful. “Where's anywhere?” There must've been something in the tone of his voice, because Hannibal gave him a look. “It's just something my dad used to say,” he said softly.

“Used to?”

“He died at sea. I was nine. It was a long time ago.”

“I'm sorry.”

Will just smiled again. They eventually extricated themselves from the warmth of the sleeping bag and each other, packing up supplies and dressing for the day ahead. Will cobbled together the best smokeless fire he could while Hannibal pulled a hunk of meat from under some leaves, where he had evidently hidden it. Will didn't ask- he had been in shock last night. He barely remembered anything from... after.

“My parents died when I was around the same age,” Hannibal volunteered all of a sudden, and Will, finally done with the fire, stopped and looked up. “Ten, I think I was.”

“I'm sorry. Both of them?”

“Yes. A terrible accident, I'm afraid.” His tone was acerbic. He seemed to be reminiscing as he fiddled with the meat, using the knife to do the best he could to cut it into smaller pieces and cook it over the fire. “A rogue Peacekeeper who used far too much force. They left both my sister and I orphaned.”

“You have a sister?”

“Had,” Hannibal corrected, and Will felt his face shift in sympathy. Hannibal was all alone in the world. He couldn't imagine losing Abigail.

“Who do you live with?”

“I stay with my uncle. But… we've never been close.”

“I'm sure your parents would've been proud of you,” he said, and Hannibal stiffened. It was a bold statement. And a potentially offensive one. Will hadn't known Hannibal's parents, and making claims about this sort of thing might make him angry. Or uncomfortable. Or sad. Will didn't want any of those things, but he couldn't seem to help it.

“What makes you think that?”

“You saved me,” he declared. “You *saved* me. *Hannibal*,” he breathed, and Hannibal's expression slackened, eyes going soft and unfocused as he stared at Will, mouth parting. It was the first time Will had addressed him by his given name. “How could they not be proud?”

Silence stretched between them, but it wasn't uncomfortable. Hannibal just gazed at him for a little while, seeming a little dazed.

“Aren't you angry at me anymore?” he asked hesitantly.

“For the Tier thing?” Will prompted, and Hannibal gave him a short nod. “Yeah. Yeah, I'm still angry. Of *course* I'm still angry.” Hannibal clenched his jaw, diverting his eyes from Will's reproachfully. “But I'm willing to forgive you. I need you. We're allies. *You saved me.*”

We're friends, he thought. *He's my friend.*

“I almost got you killed,” Hannibal argued.

“And then you saved me. You've saved me so *much*. I think all that outweighs the one time you did the opposite,” Will replied. “And besides, the past is in the past. This is the Games, after all. People do terrible things. Things they wouldn't usually do.”

“You and I both know that isn't the case here.”

You wouldn't know them. It felt like a lifetime ago he'd heard those words pass from Hannibal's lips, when in reality, it hadn't even been two days. Hannibal had killed people before the Games. Three people, to be exact. What possible reason could he have to justify that? Perhaps one, at a stretch two, but *three?* Will had chosen to ignore it at the time. Maybe that had been the wrong choice.

“I don't really know, actually,” he remarked. “You never explained yourself. I'm not jumping to conclusions.”

“I killed three people before I entered the Games,” Hannibal admitted, clearly this time, and Will was shocked at how *brazen* it was. His eyes darted around the area, searching for recording devices, but Hannibal didn't seem to care. “I don't care if they hear. What can they do?”

“They could have you killed?”

“*Please*. I'm one of the favourites to win. I fit in perfectly in the Capitol.” He smiled as he roasted the meat further. It wasn't his genuine, caught-off-guard smile that Will occasionally managed to coax out of him. It was his smile that said *I know exactly what I'm talking about.* “My actions may be savage, but my demeanour is not. As long as you utilise the etiquette and dress the part, then they adore you.”

“Dress the part? I can't imagine you with pink hair,” Will said, and it was only a little bit because he wanted to see Hannibal's real smile. He was rewarded thoroughly with an almost-grin and huffed laugh.

“I prefer suits, really,” Hannibal commented. “Entirely acceptable in Capitol society.”

“I guess I wouldn't be.” He thought of his shabby attempts to look presentable, untameable hair and sullen attitude. He'd kept up a fairly convincing act in the Training Center, but he could only do that for so long. He couldn't do that *forever*.

“They've had worse victors, trust me.”

Will remembered a few in his lifetime, but only a few. Victors who were truly primitive, usually ones from outlying Districts that had needed to learn to become utterly animal in order to survive and beat the Careers. Sometimes they didn't revert back. The Games… they messed people up. Seriously. Irreversibly. The Capitol couldn't do much about it, and usually just focused more on sponsoring tributes that would make a nice and *pretty* addition to the victors, one who wouldn't cause too much trouble.

It made him feel *sick*.

Those victors who had killed people, who had become something *else* in the arena… they had done bad things. But they weren't bad people. Not all of them. Not necessarily. They had been forced into a deadly situation, without their consent, out of their control, and they did what they did because they wanted to *survive*. The remaining victors either lived with guilt, or they lived without it.

Both options were bad.

The ones who lived with guilt, which was the majority of them, were shells of the people they used to be. They were quiet and reserved, sad and tired. So, so tired. There were a few that didn't act as such in the public eye, but it was clear to the Districts it was all an act. Nobody got over the Games. The ones without guilt, a small minority, were worse, in some ways. They were either psychopaths who genuinely didn't care, or had just been so utterly destroyed by the Games that they didn't quite feel the weight of it. Those ones deserved pity, not hatred.

The golden children of the Districts. The Capitol's shining beacon of hope. The Hunger Games really *did* work- look at what it produced! Victors!

All Will saw were victims.

“What meat is this?” he asked when it was finally cooked, and Hannibal handed over a piece of it skewered on a stick.

“Rabbit,” he answered smoothly. There was something about the way he said it. How *fast* he said it. It might've been nothing, really. It probably was. But it made Will feel *wrong*.

“Did you catch it last night?”

“Yes.”

“With what?”

Hannibal paused. “A knife.”

“You *caught* it with a knife? Rabbits are fast, Hannibal. And it was dark and wet.” Hannibal didn't say a word. He kept eye contact with Will, caught out, waiting for him to figure it out. “What meat is this?” Will repeated. He had a suspicion, but surely it wasn't...

“It's Matthew Brown.”

Oh. Will tried not to visibly let on that he was hit by a wave of queasiness, and desperately tried to throw his mind back to last night. It was no use. After Brown, and the hug, it was all a blurred rush of memories. He vaguely remembered being led back to the den, as quick as possible in an attempt by Hannibal to prevent him from seeing Brown's face in the sky. Hannibal had probably gone back to the clearing and cut of some of his flesh while Will was uselessly trying to get to sleep in the den.

“You tried to feed me my would-be rapist?”

“Will-”

“That meat you gave me the day after Tier, that wasn't rabbit either was it?” It was all coming back now. The brush off and assurance it was rabbit, when Will hadn't seen any animals in the arena except the dead ones that had been strung over Chiyoh's shoulder.

“No. It was Nicholas Boyle.” It must've happened while Will had been beating Tier to death. Hannibal had stowed Boyle's dead flesh in his pack, waiting to cook it the next day.

“Oh, god.” He lurched to his feat, dropping the meat, unsteady. He tried not to gag. “You've been eating people. You've been feeding me them.”

“Only a few. You don't understand, Will. We would've *starved*.”

“*No we wouldn't!” h*e shouted, and Hannibal stood so he could face him properly. “We could've eaten *literally anything else*. We didn't *need* meat. Let alone *human* meat.”

“We needed to keep our strength up. I don't expect you to understand my reasoning, Will-”

“Who were they?” he snarled. “The people you killed before. Who were they, and *why*.” Hannibal froze, struggling to find the words. “*Tell* me, or I walk away right now.”

Hannibal paused.

“The Peacekeeper who killed my parents,” he murmured finally. He didn't meet Will's eyes. “He was the first. I confronted him one day, a few years after. Things turned violent, and. Well. It was an accident. I was thirteen. I hadn't meant to do it.”

“And the second?”

“Chiyoh's mother. A mercy killing,” he explained at Will's frown. “She had been very ill, for a long time. She wanted to die. Chiyoh couldn't bring herself to do it, so she asked me to. I complied.”

It felt as if he was building up to something. The third, the worst.

“The third?”

“I tortured and murdered a classmate.”

Everything stopped. Time felt still, and the air punched out of Will's lungs in an instant. He wondered if the Gamemakers had muted the noises in the arena, because everything felt quiet and strained, like they were standing on the point of a pin; Will felt hyper-aware and more alert than ever. He was allies with a cold-blooded murderer. A cannibal. A *psychopath*.

“Why?” His voice was barely a whisper.

He didn't know what he was expecting. 'I wanted to'? 'I hated him'? 'I'm a psychopath'?

“He tortured and murdered my sister.”

Hannibal looked positively devastated. For *his* standards, that was. His jaw was clenched tight and his head was bowed, ever-so-slightly. His hands were trembling where they hung at his sides. *He's a murderer,* Will thought. *A psychopath.*

A sensitive psychopath.

“Oh, *Hannibal*.” He couldn't stop it from escaping his mouth. He *pitied* him. “So… he deserved it?”

“Mischa was six years old. She was a *child*. How could he *not* have deserved it?”

Will crept closer to him, sympathy softening his face until Hannibal seemed to lower his defences a little. He sighed, sinking back down to the ground and turning his attention back to the meat, determinedly ignoring Will. The fire crackled, and the human meat went with it. Will's insides squirmed at the thought of it. He sat down next to Hannibal anyway.

“What happened?”

“She was *six*,” Hannibal repeated, seemingly stuck on that fact. “Only six. So *young*. She would've been twelve, now. Our parents had died a few years previous, and she was all I had, really. One night she went missing without explanation, just gone from her bed. We searched for hours but could find no trace of her.” He stopped for a second, eyes far off. He breathed deeply. “I left school the next day to find her bloodied body chained against the school fence. The healers found she'd been subjected to hours worth of torture. I've… never quite gotten over it.”

“That's *barbaric*,” Will exclaimed, horrified at the severity of it. Who tortured a *child?* “I'm not *surprised* you've never gotten over it. Who would *do* that?”

“I don't even remember his name, now,” Hannibal said, matter-of-fact. “But I knew it was him. I saw it in his face while the other children cried and screamed at the sight of her. It took me years to plan it, to decide how to do it right. But I did it. Eventually. I don't regret it.”

“I understand, I think. I have a little sister, and… if anybody did that to her, I… I can't imagine what I'd do.”

“The same as I would.” Hannibal's gaze bore into him now; intense, unyielding. Will didn't break eye contact. “It could turn any brother into a monster. Even you, with all your innocence and morality.”

“I may not kill for sport, but I'm far from innocent.”

“Killing to survive in the Games doesn't exactly make you guilty.”

“Touché.” Will shook his head, staring into the fire. “This is wrong, you know. Eating people. We could've lived off berries and herbs. We could've survived without it. This is unnecessary. And it's disgusting.”

“Of course we could've survived. But only for a little while. How do you expect to win on a half-empty stomach?” Will scoffed, preparing for a rebuttal, but Hannibal beat him to the

chase. “Do you think Tobias Budge is taking half measures with his food?”

“Probably not,” Will conceded. “People, though? Really?”

“I'm not one for taking risks.”

“I'm a risk,” he opposed, and Hannibal smirked. “Choosing me as an ally is a risk. I'm not like you. I can't fight the way you do. I can't *kill* the way you do.”

“Perhaps not,” Hannibal admitted. “But you *can* survive. What's so wrong about that?”

“I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you.”

“I disagree. You would've found a way. I know you, Will. I see you.”

See?

“And I see you,” he replied, voice quiet. Hannibal's breath audibly caught in his throat.

His mouth fell open as if to reply, or he was simply that surprised, but Will shushed him before he could do anything. There was a sound in the distance, the clear sound of somebody trudging through the undergrowth, stepping on crunchy leaves and branches in their wake. It could be Bev. But it could also be Budge. His heart leapt to his throat, and he mirrored Hannibal as they slowly and quietly stood and reached for their packs. Reached for their weapons.

The footsteps got closer.

Finally, Will could see a figure emerging from the trees, and he could tell the second that they saw him and Hannibal. They stopped short, hand slowly moving toward their side, where Will assumed some sort of weapon was. He took a nervous step forward, squinting to see who it was.

It was becoming increasingly evident that the figure was small and slim, with hair reaching down past their shoulders. They seemed to have the build of a girl.

By Will's calculations, there were only two girls left in the arena. One of them was the District 5 girl, who was tall with short hair, and a much broader frame than this person. Which meant it was likely the other.

Which meant it was Beverly.

Chapter End Notes

not long to go until the end!!!! I'm very excited to start posting the second part to the series :)

Chapter 18

Will didn't think. The knife fell from his hand and he sprinted towards her; he was there in less than three seconds, sweeping her up into a hug that was so full with joy it lifted her from the ground. It felt as if she was weightless. A laugh of pure and utter relief escaped her mouth and she threw her arms around him, holding him tighter than he had ever been held. For now, everything was okay. It was more than okay.

He had missed her so much, but now she was *here*.

“I looked for you,” he mumbled into her shoulder, fighting back the wave of hysteria that threatened his reflex to cry. “I looked for you everywhere. For every single day.”

“I looked for you too,” she choked out. “I missed you.”

He clung to her. He loved her.

Eventually he pulled himself together and set her down on the ground, stepping back from the hug and smiling openly at her. She grinned back, wide and unrestrained and everything he had missed so very deeply. He began to lead her back to the den, happier than he had been in quite a while, but her pace slowed when she saw who was sitting there in front of it, happily roasting meat.

“Are you allies with *Hannibal Lecter?”*

“Oh. Um. Kind of?” She glanced at him incredulously, and then back to Hannibal, who was tactfully ignoring their presence and pretending he couldn't hear them. “Yeah. Yes. I'm allies with Hannibal Lecter. It's a long story.”

“I'm...”

“He's saved me, Bev,” he implored, seeing her hesitation. His voice was quiet, now, out of earshot to Hannibal. “He's saved me so much. I need him. *We* need him.”

“There aren't many of us *left*.”

“And Budge is one of them,” Will reminded her. “Forgetting Hannibal, he's the most formidable tribute in here. We won't survive against him if it's just us.”

“Tell me you mean it,” she whispered, seeming to finally hear him. Her jaw was tight. “I trust you. Just tell me you mean it.”

“I mean it,” he promised, and she sighed, accepting.

He felt relief course through him and hung back, watching as she marched over to their little fire and introduced herself to Hannibal. He seemed taken aback by her forwardness- she

really was something. A force of nature. No wonder she survived this long on her own. As if he ever could have doubted her.

Finding Bev had been a miracle, in one sense. A blessing. But it brought up a whole host of questions he had been trying to ignore since he entered the arena- what now? How in any way could they both win? If only one of them could become victor, how could he convince her to let him die? And what about Hannibal?

What about Hannibal, indeed.

That was something he hadn't considered at *all*. Hannibal would have to die, of course. They would have to use him to kill Budge and then manage to kill him themselves. Will *knew* that, really. But actually thinking about it… he didn't want that. He didn't want Hannibal gone. He cared about him. Yes, he was nothing less than a murderous psychopath, but Will *cared* about him. Disregarding his deception from time to time, he had shown nothing but kindness to Will. And here Will was planning to betray him.

Killing Hannibal wouldn't be the same as killing the others.

Buddish, he hadn't known. It had been hard at the time since he'd never killed before, but it hadn't really *meant* anything. Tier had been mindless, it had been complete instinct. He had felt barely any of it. It was the same for Stammets. It had felt numb. But Hannibal. Hannibal, he knew. Hannibal, he *liked*. Killing Hannibal wouldn't be easy. It wouldn't be numb. It would mean so *much*.

Will was dreading it.

He reluctantly made his way over to Bev and Hannibal, moving to sit in front of the fire. He smiled over at Beverly, but felt Hannibal's eyes on him.

“We should get moving soon,” Will said. “It's probably not smart to stay in the same place. The Gamemakers might start herding us.”

“Within the next hour would be wise,” Hannibal suggested. “I'll go and collect some food for the journey.”

Will watched as he stood gracefully and disappeared into the trees. That wasn't really the reason, and they all knew it. Hannibal was being polite, and was fairly good at reading the atmosphere. Trust him to maintain niceties in a place like this.

“How are you?” Will murmured, staring into the fire.

“As good as you can be, I guess. It's been a long week,” she replied. “Well. Week and a half.”

“What happened to you?”

“I couldn't find you after the bloodbath. I walked for *days*- I looked for you. I was allies with this girl Eva, for a little while,” she remarked, and Will started at the name. He remembered her pinned up against the tree, begging for mercy. His stomach turned. “She left a few days back to go with the boy from her District. I saw their faces in the sky last night.”

An explanation rested on his tongue, heavy. Its weight was too great to speak.

“I also, um. May have gotten myself in trouble with the Capitol, a bit.” Will looked at her imploringly, and she swallowed. “I kind of found the bodies of two girls before the hovercraft got there to take them away. One of them was that Career from District Two. I think they had some kind of suicide pact. I don't know whether they were just friends, or in love, or whatever. But… I made them a raft.”

“A raft?”

“I sent them down the river,” she whispered. “Their bodies were just so close together. They looked so peaceful- you'd think they were just sleeping. I couldn't stop remembering what they looked like when they were alive- they were real people once. Real people with lives and families and *feelings*. Feelings for each other that were so strong they decided to die together. I didn't want them to just get snatched up by the Capitol. That's what got them there in the first place.”

“Bev,” he said softly. It was a nice gesture, but only a temporary one. “You know-”

“I know the hovercraft would've got them eventually. I *know*,” she insisted. “But I just needed to do that. Even if it only lasted an hour. I needed to show that Capitol that *we aren't theirs.*”

Everything was quiet. Will felt such a fierce rush of pride and affection that his eyes began to sting, heart swelling in his chest. What reckless, foolish courage. What hopeful abandon. He beamed at her.

“You're right.”

“Thanks,” she murmured. “Anything interesting happen to you?”

If only she knew.

“Oh, I'm in trouble with the Capitol too. I had a long rant about their shallow ignorance- just the usual.”

She grinned. “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you too. So much.”

It was silent between them for a minute, but it wasn't awkward. They'd known each other so *long*; they didn't need to talk. It was just them, plain and simple, and it almost felt like they were back home sitting on the riverbank again. It almost felt like they'd trudge back home for dinner in a few hours and Will would eat a tiny meal and sit across from his mother and Abigail, and he'd get into a semi-warm and semi-comfortable bed, all ready for school tomorrow. It was more of the same, every day. It wasn't much at all. He had hated it sometimes, and longed to escape.

But it was home.

And he missed it dreadfully.

He missed the monotony and the bad meals and his tiny network of friends. He missed it so much he could barely breathe.

“Your hair's got longer,” she remarked all of a sudden, seemingly just to break the silence, reaching out and tugging on one of his curls that had swept across his face. He hadn't even noticed how much it had grown, really, but it was even worse than before: an untameable mane that only served to make him look more boyish than he actually was.

“They don't have a great barber's here,” he muttered, and Bev laughed, before trailing off with a sincere look at him.

“What really happened to you?” she asked, voice still low, still preserving their short-lasting guise of peace. “Allies with Lecter- how did *that* happen?”

“Well… you know about before. He kept asking. I ignored him because I thought that was my only option. But then the bloodbath happened, and I nearly died. I nearly *died*,” he repeated. He hadn't really come to terms with it- he'd been so close to death so many times since then. It didn't seem to matter. “He saved me. He saved my life. And he told me to run. I wouldn't have run if it weren't for him.”

“So you've been with him this whole time?”

“No. No, it was days before he found me. I was on my own for a little while. But he kind of...” He hesitated. It was a topic that made him feel uncomfortable in more ways than one. “He kind of sent Randall Tier to kill me. So it was easier for him to find me. And then he helped kill Tier and his allies,” he added hastily, but she still looked furious.

“He did *what?”*

“It's complicated. He did it so he could track me, it wasn't to just kill me.”

“Are you *defending* him?”

“*No,”* he protested, and sighed, realising that he was, kind of. “Maybe. Yeah, a little bit. You don't understand. He's saved me so *much*.”

“How does that make what he's done okay? He tried to have you *killed*.”

“*It wasn't like that,”* he insisted. “I'm angry about it, don't get me wrong. I'm so *angry*. But the rules of morality and ethics are different in the Games, everyone knows that. Him saving me doesn't cancel out any of the bad things he's done, but it sure as hell means *something*. Especially in here. I *trust* him. I do. It wasn't about killing me.”

She deflated, shaking her head. Her voice was still bitter. “If you really say so.”

“I do. I say so. Please, Bev. Take my word for this.” She nodded reluctantly, and his heart lifted. “I should probably go and talk to him.”

“Why?”

“I don't know, I just...” He huffed, rubbing his hands together to alleviate the slight chill in the air. “We haven't really talked about what happens now. Now we've found you. I… There's some stuff that needs to be said. I think.”

“You care about him, don't you?” It was soft, and tactful. He could feel the hesitancy in the question, but he didn't feel ashamed.

“Yeah. Not the way I care about you, but… When you go through this kind of thing together, there's some level of attachment involved. I do care about him. More than I imagined I ever could.”

She scoffed, yet all he could do was brush her off with a smile and stood, heading off in the vague direction Hannibal had left in. It didn't take him long to find him. He was standing in a clearing not too far away, looking down at the ground. Will knew instantly. This was where he had found Brown last night. This was where everything had almost been ruined.

“Hi,” he said, and his voice sounded too loud, his tone too brash- was his façade of being fine completely transparent? It felt that way.

“Hello, Will. Are you reacquainted with Beverly?”

“Yeah,” he replied. He didn't know what to say. The atmosphere between them was more strained than it had been in *days*- yesterday had been bad but Will hadn't exactly *wanted* to say anything. Now it felt as if he had to. “Thanks for giving us a moment.”

“It was no hardship,” Hannibal responded, smooth, accented voice curling around the words and making Will's heart hurt. *You're going to be dead,* he thought, lump in his throat. He missed him already. “Will...” Hannibal began, uncharacteristically awkward and surprisingly stuck on his words. After a pause, the words seemed to form. “Do you love her?” he asked in a small voice. Will hadn't expected something so simple.

“Platonically or romantically?”

“The latter.” He sounded so *unsure*. Will had never heard him like this.

“No. Not like that,” Will confirmed, and Hannibal only exhaled at his answer.

Nothing was said for a minute. The weight of the silence was crushing, and Will had to try not to turn and run back to Bev's familiar companionship. Hannibal was… unfamiliar. Things weren't completely alien between them, and they never really had been, but with Hannibal he felt so uncertain. Like anything could happen. And there was a tiny part of him, one that he hadn't really been aware of until recently, that *wanted* anything to happen. He didn't know what anything was, but he wanted it so much in times like these, when unspoken words and endless possibilities stretched between them. It made gooseflesh line his skin.

He braced himself, and stepped out into the clearing. All the nerves in his body felt alight.

He remembered the way Brown had touched him: brutal and searing and intrusive.

He remembered the way Hannibal had touched him: gentle and desperate and kind.

Hannibal had done terrible things to him. He had deceived him in the worst ways- attempted murder and unknowing cannibalism were *extreme*. But the way Hannibal had held him, only the night before, so grateful and fearful and *loving*… Will could never forget it. He didn't want to.

“What now?” Hannibal asked eventually, eyes fixed on Will as he stepped out into salvation.

“I don't know,” Will answered honestly. “I really don't know. It's… complicated.”

“I know you said we're just allies, Will, but I...” Hannibal sighed. “I see you as a friend. You're my friend.”

Will could tell he'd been wanting to say it for a long time. Will thought maybe he'd been wanting to *hear* it for a long time. Hannibal was *important* to him. He wasn't just some ally he'd let die and get over in time. Hannibal was *more*. He'd always been more. And to listen to his own feelings being reciprocated and shared back with him… it meant something. Something significant, too big and too unknown to name. What he felt for Hannibal was uncharted waters, really.

But he was good with water, always had been.

“What I said… I didn't really mean it. Not properly. And now, after… everything. You're my friend too.” Will could barely believe he was actually saying it. But one of them could die soon, and if it was going to be said at all, it had to be now. “I care about you, Hannibal.”

He looked struck. Will loved it when he got like this, silly and surprised at seemingly normal words from Will's mouth. Eventually, after standing stock still for a minute, he crossed the clearing in a few swift strides and stopped in front of Will, his presence heavy and commanding. Will couldn't move as Hannibal lifted a hand and pressed it against his cheek, palm cupped against his jaw, smooth and warm. It wasn't quite like *that*, or at least Will thought so. It was just one of Hannibal's eccentric mannerisms. How he expressed fondness, Will supposed.

“We're going to get out of this,” Hannibal murmured, voice low and rich. “I don't know how, but I'm not going to kill you. I'm not going to *try*. And I trust that you will do the same.”

“But Bev...”

“Her too. All three of us. We can win.”

“That's *impossible*,” Will argued. His voice was still quiet, his cheek still pressed against Hannibal's hand. “There's only one victor. Every year. There can't even be *two*, let alone *three*.”

“I'll find a way.”

“I don't deny that you're incredibly smart and resourceful, Hannibal, but you can't do *everything*. You can't do this.”

“I will. I have to.”

“*Why?”*

“You said it yourself. We're friends. I don't let my friends die.”

Chiyoh, Will thought, and then chastised himself for his cruelty. As if Hannibal had had any power over that. It had been an awful thing to think, like Hannibal had *let her* die. In fact, this may have been a manifestation of any guilt Hannibal might've felt over not being able to save her- adamantly and determinedly vowing that he was not only going to save Will, but Beverly too, while knowing that it was damn near impossible. Will didn't believe he could do it at all, but there was no harm in letting him try.

“You barely know Bev.”

“I know *you*. And you love her. You wouldn't be able to function without her. I wouldn't let that happen to you.”

“Okay,” Will found himself whispering. “I think you're crazy. I don't think it can be done. But okay. You should try.”

“I will,” Hannibal vowed, and pulled his hand away from Will's cheek. Slowly. Will swore he felt his thumb trace his jawline.

The conversation felt well and truly over, and that was probably a good thing, since it was exactly then that the cannon fired. Will froze.

He had *just* reunited with Beverly. Less than an *hour* ago- if something had happened to her, if she had *died*, he would never forgive himself. He had left her alone and defenceless while he went off to have pointless and emotionally charged chats with Hannibal Lecter. There was a likely possibility that the cannon had been for someone on the completely opposite side of the arena, but as the number of tributes lessened, the possibility it was Bev grew. He got scared every single time he heard it.

Will practically turned and *ran*. He could feel Hannibal hot on his heels, and they made it back to the den in no time, swiftly emerging through the trees to see a girl standing over a body. Blood was still spurting from its throat. The girl turned, and Will saw it was Bev. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Will, I...” She looked devastated. Her hands were covered in blood. “I didn't know what to *do*. She just ran out of the trees, right behind me. I thought she was going to hurt me. I didn't… I just *reacted*.”

That was clear. The girl's throat hadn't been slit, it had been stabbed. It was reaction, out of pure instinct. It was done by someone trying to survive, not someone trying to *kill*.

“It's okay,” Will said. It came out hushed.

It was a lie. Nothing was okay.

Nothing would ever be okay again.

He saw her hands were shaking. He knew it was hypocritical, more than hypocritical really, but he couldn't go to her. It was *Beverly*, his best friend, and she had just killed somebody.

He remembered their first day at school together, back when they were bright-eyed and chubby-cheeked, like it was yesterday.

She had killed someone. He had too. But it wasn't the same.

She was supposed to be the good one.

In the end it was Hannibal, with his even voice and steady hands, that made her drop the knife Will hadn't noticed she was holding. It was Hannibal who placed both hands on her shoulders and told her it was going to be okay, who stopped her shaking and smoothed out the fearful lines of her face. Hannibal who sluiced unnecessary amounts of their valuable water over her hands to wash off the blood.

Oh well. It wasn't like they'd need water much longer, anyway. There were only five tributes left.

Four of them would be dead soon.

Chapter 19

Will was ignoring it.

They'd been walking for hours, night was about to fall, and Will hadn't said a word about what had transpired earlier at the den. He didn't want to. He wasn't quite in *denial*, but it was just so much easier to pretend it hadn't happened. Beverly seemed *fine,* and so was he. Really. It was hard to think about someone he'd known since childhood as a killer, but this was the Games. He'd killed too. If they got out of this then he just have to forget it, to get over it and think of it as some distant, vivid dream. He was planning to do that with so much of this experience.

Except Hannibal.

He would forget it all, if he could, but his memories of Hannibal belonged in a special little pocket near his heart, interwoven with the blooming bluebells of new hope.

“We should settle down here for the night,” Hannibal suggested at the mouth of a small cave, set back in a mossy bank. It stretched a little ways backwards, and the opening was a reasonable size. Will ached to just fall asleep and dream away the events of earlier.

“It's not dark yet,” Bev argued.

“No, but we could have a long night ahead of us. We should sleep while we can.” Hannibal sighed, almost in dread. “There are only five tributes left, in what I'm assuming are two rather small groups. The Games will be over by the end of tomorrow. Possibly tonight.”

“Other Games have waited longer. Last year had only two tributes left before the Gamemakers started herding them together,” Will interjected.

“Essentially, we *do* only have two tributes. If you look at it from the perspective of who's going to kill who. We three count as one tribute to them, really. None of us are going to kill one another.”

He was right. Hannibal seemed to be sticking to his promise to get all of them out of there, Will would never hurt Beverly, and the prospect of killing Hannibal wasn't appealing to him either. Considering Bev's reaction at what had happened earlier, she was probably in no hurry to repeat it. Will's stomach churned at the memory he'd been successfully repressing for the last few hours, and he simply nodded at Hannibal's suggestion.

“You two should rest. I'll keep watch.”

“That doesn't seem fair. You should sleep too,” Bev protested.

“I will, in a few hours. But the sleeping bag barely fits two and we need someone to keep watch. Anything could happen at this point. Someone has to stay awake.”

Will could tell Beverly was going to insist out of politeness that she be first watch, but he just nodded his thanks to Hannibal and dragged her away before she could do so. He stared at the outline of Hannibal's back against the darkening sky as he and Bev settled in the sleeping bag, eyes tracing his broad shoulders, the elegant curve of his neck, the way his once perfectly styled hair lay unbrushed and dirty, nearly reaching past his ears.

He was a mystery. He was Will's mystery.

“Are you angry?” Bev suddenly whispered, the hushed words bursting out of her like she'd been holding them in for ages. She probably had.

“About what?”

“You know exactly what.”

“I'm not angry.”

“Then why aren't you saying anything?”

“It's *hard*,” Will admitted. “It's weird. It's *you*. I'm not angry, I'm not *that* much of a hypocrite- I killed people too. But seeing it.. seeing *you* do it. It's just hard.”

“I think I understand,” she replied. “It's not easy for me either, though.”

“I'm sorry. I was being selfish, wasn't I?”

“A bit,” she said, but good humour was in her tone. “It's okay. We all are sometimes. And this whole situation… it's a mess. I get where you're coming from.”

“I don't deserve you,” he murmured, but she shushed him, shaking her head at his words.

“Don't be stupid. Go to sleep.”

His gaze strayed back to Hannibal, sitting at the entrance to the cave and potentially hearing everything they were saying. A rush of affection coursed through him, and he shut his eyes against the force of it. He felt so many different confusing things for Hannibal, and affection was definitely one of them. One of the more powerful ones. He let sleep take him, feelings for Hannibal tucked close against his chest, fears for the future held at arms length as he pursued peace for what could be the last time before he died.

He could die tomorrow. He could die *tonight*.

It was the first thing that sprung to mind as he was jostled awake a few hours later, unwillingly dragged into the waking world.

“What's happening?”

“Nothing,” came Hannibal's voice as he moved closer to Will, joining him in the sleeping bag. “Go back to sleep. We're just changing watches.”

He forced his eyes open. Thankfully, it was almost pitch black except for the moonlight illuminating the mouth of the cave. Bev sat there, her figure a silhouette against the starry, artificial sky.

“Did I miss the anthem?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannibal responded. “It was only the one face.”

“How did Beverly take it?”

“She was asleep.” Will sighed in relief, curling against Hannibal's chest, deeper into the warmth of the sleeping bag. “Do you trust me, Will?”

“Yeah. Why'd you ask?”

“I just want you to remember that, when we end up with Budge. He wants me to appeal to him. I might not be saying everything I mean.”

“Sure,” Will agreed, not really listening, sleep already taking over.

He was unconscious before Hannibal said anything else.

He only woke again at Beverly's gentle shake of his shoulder in the early hours of the morning. Sunlight was beginning to creep into the sky, and by Will's guess it really wouldn't be too long before the Gamemakers got to work on orchestrating a grand finale for the Capitol to enjoy. He dwelt on this as he sat at the foot of the cave, anxious and alert for any sign of disturbance. On any other day it might've been boring, but this could be the last day of the Games. This could be the day he died.

Sunlight crept ever-further.

Will had never really been fond of the sun.

It was a few hours before the other two began to stir, eventually making their way down the cave and over to Will. Hannibal came first, bringing a weak smile and weary eyes. They were all tired, really. Beverly alleviated the ominous atmosphere slightly; the sight of the crinkles by her eyes when she smiled and the warmth of her hand as she squeezed his shoulder made him forget, for a minute. But anything could happen today. He'd do best to remember it.

“You really think it'll end today?” he asked Hannibal.

“Unless Budge decides to kill Franklyn, then yes. I'm almost certain it'll end today. The public don't want another day of tributes walking around. They want blood.”

Will felt as if Hannibal had nailed it, really. That was all the public wanted. Blood. They'd never admit it, of course, but they were more bloodthirsty than most tributes. They *wanted* this. Tributes didn't get a choice. Even the ones that volunteered, it was just *brainwashing*- they could win, they'd escape the conditions of their District, the Capitol was grand and great and everything they wanted. It was all lies and most of them knew it. It was a shame that some of them didn't.

They all started at the sound of a sudden booming voice, that seemed to come from all around. Frederick Chilton's smug and charismatic voice was recognisable anywhere.

“Attention, Tributes. The regulations requiring a single victor have been suspended. From now on, two victors may be crowned and survive the 74th Hunger Games. This will be the only announcement.”

Will stayed frozen. He wasn't an idiot. While it was Chilton's voice, it wasn't him speaking, they weren't his words. Chilton was a puppet. They were President Verger's words, and Verger was smart. Verger was aiming this directly at him.

Choose, he was saying. *Choose between your friends.*

This was the Capitol's entertainment. This was his punishment for the words he'd said to Hannibal only a few days ago. It felt like months.

He knew this had been coming, or something like it, at least. His closeness with Bev couldn't go ignored by the Capitol as a tactic to entertain viewers, and his burgeoning friendship with Hannibal had been an added bonus. They had to acknowledge it- it upped the stakes. Now the Capitol had emotional investments. They weren't just rooting for lone wolves and single victors, they were rooting for *relationships*. That held far more weight than the prospect of one winner of the Games.

They were both looking at him. He couldn't bear to look back. At either of them.

They both knew who he would choose.

Dark hair and sunlit days and *home*. As if he could ever let her go.

“Forget it,” he choked out. “Forget it, it doesn't matter. Let's keep moving.”

It mattered.

But it had begun to rain. The first droplet that hit his cheek made him look up, grateful for something else to focus on. It was fairly obvious what it meant- there was a clear patch of the sky, a little ways in the distance, that was clear, free from the terrible weather. That was where the Games would end, evidently. The Gamemakers wanted them there. He suspected it was the Cornocopia, but nobody really knew with the Games. The Gamemakers could choose anywhere. They could do anything. They had complete control.

And so he walked to his death, Hannibal strolling along upfront and Bev by his side. It was easier this way, really. If they didn't do as they were told, the method of driving them there would just get more violent; it was best to take their chances with as little danger as possible. The Gamemakers didn't shy away from that possibility, though. Will could hear snapping and breaking behind him, the sound of trees folding in on themselves and falling, like the arena was just turning into nothing, shrinking as it followed in their footsteps. It was a warning: stop walking and die. They had to keep going. Which also lead to death. Potentially. Probably.

The trees began to thin out as the rain got lighter. His hair was soaking, longer than ever, and it hung in his eyes. Eventually he gave up on smoothing it back.

The end of the forest came into sight, and the rain stopped reaching them: now,Will could see the gold glinting off the Cornocopia. The sun was barely above the horizon, but the colours of sunrise were refracting of the Cornocopia's shine, making it hard to look at directly, even through the trees. Squinting, Will could see through the golden shimmer of the new day, two figures by the Cornocopia. Everything was still and silent, and they stopped at the tree line. Hannibal stepped forward, and Will's breath caught.

The walk across the open field felt like the longest walk of his life. He hadn't been so exposed in a long time, since he'd spent the last few weeks living deep in the forest, where trees provided some kind of cover, even if it wasn't much. He was now in plain sight for Budge, for the cameras, for everybody. He was surprised his limbs were managing to move.

“Lecter,” Budge acknowledged, once they got close enough. He stood tall and threatening, a long, thin kind of wire in his hand- a whip, perhaps- which was hanging loosely by his side, allowing the perception of nonchalance. “Graham.”

“Tobias,” Hannibal returned. Will was slightly affronted Beverly had been overlooked, but now really wasn't the time. He kept quiet.

The air was practically fizzling. It was like what Will imagined to be the short time period before a bomb went off, while watching it count down, knowing full well what was going to happen. Detonation was close, and they could all feel it. The question was: who would escape the explosion? It could only be two of them.

“Hannibal, we can work this out.” It was Franklyn, who'd crossed the odd gap between them, the gap that made it look like they were on opposing sides of vast armies, when in reality there were five of them. Pitiful. “There doesn't need to be a fight.”

Hannibal simply smiled, cocked his head, almost amused.

“Don't be an idiot, Franklyn,” Budge snapped. “We have to fight.”

Franklyn turned, his back to Hannibal. “Tobias-”

Hannibal stepped forward, and snapped his neck.

Bev gasped, nearly inaudibly, but Will reached a hand out to grasp her wrist and squeeze in what he hoped was a comfort. Franklyn fell to the ground with a thump, neck bent at an angle, eyes unseeing. The minute he'd stepped forward, Will knew it was coming. He was an annoyance, an unnecessary and expendable presence. Hannibal wouldn't like that.

“I was looking forward to that,” Budge mused.

“I saved you the trouble,” Hannibal replied. “He did have a point though: do we have to fight? Now there can be two victors, after all.”

“Are you saying those victors should be you and I?” Budge asked. Will wondered the same thing. Was Hannibal really doing this? He watched in horror, throat stuck around words he couldn't say. He wanted to *shout*, to *scream* at Hannibal and ask what the *hell* he was doing. But he just watched.

“Of course,” Hannibal answered, and took another step forward. “We are the deserving victors. We've worked for this, Tobias. They mean nothing.”

It felt as if the world was crashing around him. Hannibal was betraying him. After his promise. After *everything*. Will and Bev wouldn't stand a *chance* against him and Budge. They were trained careers. They were unstoppable. Will saw it register on Budge's face, the thought of it: the glory, the companionship, everything he'd ever wanted. He looked victorious, smirk curling his mouth, the set of his shoulders a little surer than before. And then he looked at Will, who was staring at him in terror and trepidation, and the victorious expression flickered into a sceptical one.

“Then look at him,” he snarled, marching forward, snatching Will by the arm, dragging him in front of Hannibal. Will only stumbled and went with him, dazed. He could be about to die. He met Bev's terrified eyes for a second, and then let his gaze drift to Hannibal. His expression was imperceptible. “Tell me he's nothing again. Look at him while you say it.”

Hannibal barely twitched, eyes moving to focus on Will. There was no emotion in his face.

“He's nothing,” he said.

“Now say it to him,” Budge ordered.

There was a pause.

“You're nothing,” Hannibal enunciated, and Will's eyes blurred with tears.

After everything.

A tear fell, and his eyes cleared slightly. It was obvious, running down his cheek at a snail pace. It was embarrassing. But Hannibal visibly reacted at the sight, stare softening and brow creasing in sympathy. He couldn't seem to help it. Budge's grip tightened, and he scoffed.

“You think I'm a *fool*, Lecter.” Budge's voice was rising in volume. Hannibal was no longer looking at Will, and his expression was back to neutral. “I see the way you look at him. You weren't about to give him up. You *wouldn't*. What was your plan? Gain my trust so it was easier to get close to me? And then kill me? I'm not *that* stupid.”

“I suppose I should've realised it would be hard to convince you,” Hannibal said mournfully. “Forgive me. I haven't had very long to think it through.”

“You're forgiven,” Budge responded.

They paused, facing each other like crouching predators. Will was forgotten.

Everything happened at once. Bev took one step forward and screamed in sudden agony, collapsing, Budge threw Will away, and he and Hannibal leapt at each other, the wire in Budge's hand making a snapping sound as it flew through the air. Will staggered forward, regaining his balance and running to Bev's side, panic clutching at him. Her foot was caught in some sort of animal trap that had been buried under the ground, and under the pressure of her foot it had closed, sharp metal like teeth around her ankle. Blood was pouring from her leg.

“I don't know what to do,” he said, squatting down beside her, voice nearly monotone. The panic had shifted to numbness. “What do I do?”

“Get it out,” she sobbed. “Please.”

He fumbled in his pack for a knife, managed to grab it and keep hold of it despite his sweaty hands, and twisted it into one side of the trap, scraping her torn flesh as he went. She screamed harder. He tried with shaking hands to pry it open, using his strength as leverage to release her foot from its metal jaws. He could feel it lodging into her already injured ankle, and her hands clapped over her mouth to quell her shouting. The sound of it broke his heart. He wasn't numb anymore.

“I'm sorry,” he kept repeating, tremulous.

One side of the trap snapped open, and more pained, muffled noises escaped the tight clasp of her hands over her mouth. Will could truly see holes where it had been, could see bloodied chunks of her flesh strung across the trap and the ground. He looked at her for affirmation, then gently began to pull the other side of the trap from her leg. He could feel it sliding through tissue and muscle, scraping against something that he really hoped wasn't bone.

“Stop,” she panted, face creased in distress. “Stop. I'll do it. Help Hannibal.”

Will nodded, panting just as hard, standing and turning to see Hannibal and Budge. His heart stopped. Hannibal was… nothing like he had expected. He was dodging blows expertly, and Will could only watch as he grabbed Budge by the waist, slamming him against the side of the Cornocopia. Will foolishly thought, for a second, that Hannibal had won, but Budge pushed back, and they were off again. Budge was no Matthew Brown. Budge was elegant, and he had been trained in the same way Hannibal had. This wasn't a carnal and bloody beating, this was a *dance*. One that Will couldn't hope to understand. But it really was beautiful, in its own way.

Hannibal, blood dripping from his mouth, met Will's eyes over Budge's shoulder as they began to advance on one another again. His eyes flicked to Will's hand, and back to his eyes. He took a deep breath, and Budge lunged again. Will looked at his hand. He was still holding the knife he'd been using to pry open the trap.

Oh.

Hannibal had stopped trying. He wasn't doing it obviously, he was still fighting, but it lacked determination. It lacked the desperate and human need to survive. Will stared in horror as Budge locked his arm around Hannibal's elbow, pulling up and *snapping*, using this window

of weakness to manoeuvre Hannibal into a headlock. Budge couldn't see it, but Hannibal was almost smiling. He looked at Will, meaning in his gaze. Will knew what he meant.

Hannibal was trusting Will. Trusting him to throw the knife, and kill Budge. Hannibal and Budge would be a close fight, and while Will would personally place his bet on Hannibal winning, it was entirely possible he wouldn't. So Hannibal had chosen a surer option- or at least surer in *his* opinion. Not so much in Will's. He had one shot at this. If he failed, then it was over. Hannibal was dead.

But then, if Will didn't throw the knife, Hannibal was dead now anyway.

“Say your goodbyes now, Graham,” Budge taunted. He peered down at Hannibal. Will took the opportunity to raise his arm, while Budge wasn't looking. “You shouldn't have underestimated me,” he growled at Hannibal.

Will tried to focus, tried to drown out the sound of Budge and Hannibal's rough gasping and Beverly's quiet cries of pain. He remembered. It had been the first time they spoke. Hannibal's hands on his waist and arm. His warm breath ghosting across his ear and neck.

Feel where you want the knife to go. See it, in your mind.

Budge looked up. He threw.

The knife embedded itself in Budge's eye.

This truly was the end.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal had his arms around Will before Budge had even hit the ground, pulling him into a relieved and grateful embrace that Will wanted to last forever.

“We're alive,” he whispered into Hannibal's neck.

He didn't get a reply, but the arms clutched around him squeezed tighter.

Eventually, he managed to drag himself away so he could move to crouch at Bev's side. She looked *wrecked*; the trap she had removed from her leg seemed to have a good portion of the flesh and muscle of her ankle caught in it, and she was steadily bleeding onto the ground. The grass, once an artificial green, was now deep crimson.

“What do we do?” he asked Hannibal, who blanched.

“I don't…” Time seemed slower, now. Hannibal's speaking lasted an age. “Stop the bleeding?”

“Right, yeah, of course,” Will muttered, pulling off his jacket and wrapping it around her ankle. She whimpered as he applied pressure. “I meant in terms of getting out of here. You promised you'd get all three of us out. How do you plan to do that?”

“Will,” he whispered. “I don't know. I didn't work it out. I didn't… I'm so sorry.”

Will looked up at him. His expression was crushed, gutted, defeated.

“It's okay,” Will managed, his voice hoarse. “It's okay.”

It was quiet, save for Bev's wheezing. A moment of reflection. One of them had to die. Heart heavy in his chest, Will imagined. If he and Beverly came out as victors, everything would go back to the way it was, kind of. He'd go home, live in a nicer house and have more money, but more or less lead the same life he'd always expected to. He'd pass school. Get a job as a fisherman. Settle down and marry a nice, normal girl. He'd refuse to mentor tributes- District 4 had enough victors, and they could do the mentoring. He'd separate from the Games entirely, forget about this wretched period in his life, and *live*.

But he'd live having known Hannibal. Having known Hannibal, his *friend*, and having watched him die. That was the catch.

However if it were he and Hannibal that came out as victors, Bev would be dead and gone. His best friend. His everything. He couldn't *do* that, he couldn't live that for a *second*. Moving into the Victors' Village, without her next door? It was unthinkable.

Both options were unappealing.

The third option was that *he* die, of course. Which he hadn't really given much thought, despite his time to prepare. He didn't *want* to die. But dying for his friends- for not just one friend, but *two*… it seemed just. It seemed fair. He was willing.

"Just let me die," Bev said, her words ripping Will from his dazed consideration of dying. "I'm hurt already. It makes sense."

"By that argument, I deserve to die too," Hannibal interjected. "Tobias broke my arm. It doesn't mean I should be picked off as the weakest. Your logic is flawed, Beverly."

"Fine, then we *all* die. We all just kill ourselves. Fuck their Games," she said fiercely. "They don't deserve a victor, I don't *want* to win-"

"Tributes," a voice boomed into the arena. It wasn't Chilton's. "I've decided to change the regulations again. Why not spice things up a little?" Will's blood ran cold. That was President Verger speaking directly to them, while they were in the *Games*. It was *unheard* of. "You all win. Congratulations. Three victors! It seems a little ridiculous, but why not? Ladies and Gentleman, your victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games!"

There was dead silence for a full minute before the jubilant and shocked cheers from the Capitol began to play from live speakers. Will couldn't hear anything except that, and the hammering of his heart. This was it. It was over.

He could go home.

It was a mantra in his head as the hovercraft flew them back to the Training Center. *I get to go home, I get to go* ***home****.* He hadn't been sure he'd see it again. And now he would get to sleep in his own bed and see his sister again. With Bev still by his side. Alive.

"Where are you taking her?" he'd questioned in sudden panic as she was escorted away by doctors.

"To get fixed," was the reply he'd received. Which was vaguely disconcerting.

But Hannibal had assured him it would be fine with a hand on his arm and guileless eyes, promising him she'd be out soon, completely fine, and Will had believed him. He *trusted* him. Things weren't exactly perfect between them, there were certainly conversations that needed to be had, but amongst this whirl of Capitol technology and pale, pinched faces, Hannibal was all he had. He gripped on tight to his other arm as the doctors tended to Hannibal's broken one, lifting it up into some sort of sling. Will was still clinging to him like a lost child when the hovercraft reached the Training Center. Fear seized him when they started to be escorted down opposing corridors.

"Hannibal," he said involuntarily. His voice came out as a croak. "*Hannibal*. Don't… please."

He tried to shake off the grip of the aides, hysteria building in him, choking off his air supply and making his vision blur. He couldn't seem to manage it, just struggled helplessly against them and tried not to hyperventilate. It was too much. He gasped for breath, nearly falling,

but then there was a softer hand on him, comforting and eager all at once. It prevented him from hitting the floor, keeping him steady.

“Will.” It was Hannibal's voice, it was Hannibal's hand, Hannibal's presence. Will would know him anywhere. “It's alright. I'm here. I've got you.”

His free hand was on Will's cheek. He dropped his head into Hannibal's chest, seeking his familiar warmth, smelling sweat and dirt and rainwater, everything that Hannibal was to him now, the smell of the arena that wasn't really a home, but was much more of one than the Capitol was. He was back there now, in that inhospitable, overly-friendly lions' den. They could keep up the false pretence of kindness all they wanted, but he knew the truth. People ate each other alive in the Capitol. It was worse than the arena, in some respects. The Games were not over. Given the fact that three of them had won, he'd wager the next few years of his life were going to be some of the hardest. This would be publicised. Greatly so. He would be expected to pander to them for a long time to come.

He was alive, yes, but the future was bleak.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered. “I'm sorry. I'm just scared. I know I'm being childish-”

“You *are* a child,” Hannibal replied with surprising vehemence. He pushed Will away from his chest, hand on his shoulder, and looked him dead in the eyes. “You're sixteen. You have every right to be scared. I'm scared too.”

Scared didn't even begin to describe the vast array of emotions coursing through him as he stared up at Hannibal, and they both knew it. He was standing in building that was anything but homely, his dearest friend was potentially dying in a surgical bay somewhere, and his closest friend from the arena and only source of companionship for the past week or so was about to be ripped away from him. It was *sadistic*. So yeah, scared didn't quite cover it. He could tell the aides were getting impatient, and knew they didn't have much time. But he couldn't stop gazing at Hannibal, grateful.

“Thank you,” he said, before the aides dragged them away from each other. The last glimpse he caught of Hannibal was him glancing over his shoulder as he was forcefully shoved round a corner.

He supposed it didn't matter. He'd see him later. It was just hard to let go, is all.

“Wait here,” one of the aides ordered as he was pushed unceremoniously into a tiny room off one of the corridors.

It was tiny and dim, a little jail cell, an uncomfortable-looking bench against one wall and a small window above it, allowing a patch of sunlight through to the room, which filtered through in a visible beam, projecting a square of brightness onto the floor. Will felt it, right in his chest. Sunlight. Real sunlight. The sun wasn't particularly something he liked, nor was it something he'd missed, since it had been hard to tell the sun was fake in the arena. But now… now, he could tell. He missed the air. He missed the sun. He missed the real world.

Stepping up onto the bench, he took a deep breath before peering through the window. The Capitol was just as beautiful as he remembered it, with its tall buildings glinting in the light of day, its bright colours and masses of joyful people walking the streets. And the sky. The *sky*. Sometimes, back home, when it was the middle of summer and they were really lucky, the sky would get this blue. Cerulean and cloudless, like something straight out of a dream. He'd usually take Abigail down to the river on days like that, bring a picnic basket and swim with her for hours on end, not really thinking how lucky he was. It hadn't ever occurred to him that he could lose those times.

Will pushed the window open to find that it only went so far, but it didn't matter. He breathed in real air for the first time in nearly two weeks, feeling dizzy and overwhelmed, in love with the world and its clarity, in love with its rawness, with its blue skies and cold air. This air was perfumed and over-clean, not *his* air, the air from District 4, but it was still *real*. Waiting didn't seem like such a terrible prospect, not now. Not here.

It was a few hours before anyone came, and he grew tired of perching on the balls of his feet with his head half-hanging out of the window. When Bev finally entered, he was lying on the bench, staring up at the dull ceiling.

“Are you okay?” was out of his mouth before he even thought of it, as he shot up, taking her in. She was in a wheelchair, one ankle wrapped in heavy bandage, the pure whites of her new clothes in stark contrast to the grime and blood still spattered on her skin.

“I'm better,” she answered, and once she'd wheeled over, he grabbed her hand, seeking some kind of comfort from her touch. He was so glad she was alive he felt sick with it.

“Is your leg...”

“Still there?” she prompted, and he winced in sympathy and guilt. “Yeah. We got out of there just in time, they didn't have to amputate. But it's pretty ruined, in all honesty.”

“Will you walk again?”

“After a lot of physical therapy, maybe. But not now. And it's probably always going to hurt- it's nerve damage, I think they said. And a lot of other big words. I don't know.”

“I'm so sorry, Bev.”

“It's not your fault. It's Budge's.” She sighed, looking down at her injured ankle. “And I can't exactly do anything about him. You took care of that.”

Will smiled.

Jack and Freddie appeared in the doorway, and suddenly Will didn't feel as peaceful anymore. They looked solemn as Jack shut the door behind them, pity written all over his face. Freddie stayed standing in the corner, seemingly put off by the environment. She'd probably never been anywhere this tiny and dingy.

“This has never happened before,” Jack articulated, not even waiting for an opening. “Ever. There has always been only one victor. To have *three*...”

“Is bad? I'm assuming,” Will guessed.

“Very. I mean, congratulations on winning, but you *didn't* win. Not really. That… *that* was orchestrated. It wasn't Chilton letting you off because he pitied you or the Head Gamemaker crowning you all victors in a panic. President Verger was already in the control room.” Jack's voice was almost a whisper. Will wondered if he was being quiet in case people were listening in, but Will supposed everyone working here probably knew what was going on. “Verger *wanted* you all to win. He did it on purpose. And it was premeditated.”

“Are you saying he's had it planned since the beginning?”

“Maybe not the beginning. I would say since you three all teamed up. He'd been reading public reactions, and thinking about what he could do with you in the future… I think he saw benefits from all of you. And he didn't want to choose.”

“So this is forever then?” Will asked, and nobody had to implore him to elaborate. They understood. The Games hadn't ended. They were his life now.

“Yes,” Jack responded, blunt. “Verger has complete control over you. Both of you. You won't be permitted the lives you wanted. I'm sorry.”

It wasn't fair. None of it was fair. He'd been free from the arena for a grand total of about four hours and he was already being told he was under President Verger's thumb. He knew it wasn't Jack's fault, that this was Jack actually being *kind* and *warning* him, but he didn't half want to resent him for it. He just wanted to go *home*.

“Beverly, you were well liked in both the Capitol and the Districts,” Jack began again. “The Capitol thought you were sweet. The Districts thought you were rebellious. They loved it- what you did, with those girls… the Capitol might've cried and adored you for your sentiment, but the Districts saw it for what it really was: dissent. They see you as something of a symbol of hope, now.”

“*Me?”* Bev questioned, incredulous.

“It was powerful,” Jack remarked. “But you need to be careful. Because the President saw it as dissent too. And he sees you as dangerous. You're a risk. But you embarrassed him in the arena, and killing you wouldn't quell that spark of rebellion in the Districts, nor would it help him show the Capitol he has everything under control. He means to tame you. Show that you aren't anything special after all.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to let him,” Jack said. She frowned. “There's a whole host of things he could threaten you with that aren't death. You need to do what he says. So we're playing it up- we'll make you seem innocent and unaware during the interview tonight, and you're going to help

us use that to convince Verger you aren't a threat. Do you understand? Are you going to help us out here?"

"Yes, I understand. I'll help." She was nodding, but her face was far-off. It was a lot to take in really, especially directly after she'd left the Games and had an operation on her severely damaged leg.

"And you, Will," he continued, turning to Will. "The Capitol seem to have concocted some phantom love story for you in the Games. We're going to need you to play along with it."

"Between me and Bev?"

"Yes. And also between you and Hannibal."

"*What?"* His voice echoed around the small room, and he stared at Jack in shock, who simply shrugged and shook his head. *Hannibal?* A *love* story? It was ridiculous and fantastical and made absolutely *no sense.* Even if there *were* anything there, which Will couldn't deny due to his reluctant one-sided attraction to Hannibal, it was *unnecessary* for them to romanticise it. They'd been through a terrible shared trauma and all some people had got out of it was a fake love story. He sighed. "Please explain."

"They believe you and Beverly were in love, at the beginning," Freddie suddenly said, turning all eyes to her. She awkwardly brushed down her dress, standing up straighter. "Childhood sweethearts, tragically ending up as tributes together. It's a story that's been done before. But then Hannibal came along, and… there's also a belief you two began to fall in love in the arena. Allies get close sometimes. They *have* fallen in love before, you know. The Capitol simply eat it up when one of them dies, leaving the other to mourn them. It's always very authentic as well, you just *know* it can't be staged."

"But nobody died this time."

"Correct. And there's never been a year where those two stories coincided, but *now*… the public believes they've got themselves their very own love triangle," she explained. "We're planning to develop it more on the Victory Tour- have you growing closer to Hannibal, with Beverly as your slighted lover. It's not fully planned yet, but you get the idea. Panem will *love* it. The President will love it."

She looked as if she were about to carry on speaking, but Will interrupted. "What then? Do I have to be in a relationship with Hannibal? For how long?"

"Oh… I." Her expression shifted into one of reproach and shame, and she swallowed awkwardly. "Forever, probably. You'll be forced into marriage, I assume. Forced to adopt. Forced to be together for the rest of your lives. The President will demand it. I'm so sorry, Will. That was why he saved you two. That was the story he wanted."

Seeing Hannibal for the rest of his life wasn't the repulsive part. Marrying Hannibal wasn't the repulsive part. It was the lack of control. The lack of free will. If, over time, something romantic developed between he and Hannibal, then who was he to stop it? Hannibal was good to him, and while Will only saw him as a friend, he wasn't unattractive. He wasn't

unkind. But the President had *no right* to dictate and pre-plan their entire lives like that. It was horrible. It was *ugly*.

“And what about tonight?” His voice came out monotone. He was feeling so much that it felt like nothing at all.

“Just act like you love them. Both of them. And they should act like they love you. I suspect Hannibal is being told exactly the same by his mentor.”

He simply nodded in reply, head caught up in the logistics of it. It was terrible, all of it, but the thought of tonight, and seeing Hannibal again…

It made it hurt just a little bit less.

Chapter End Notes

when u hate yourself for being unrealistic but then remember its fanfic x

Chapter 21

The lights were blinding as he sat sandwiched in between Hannibal and Beverly on a plush velvet couch that had never made an appearance in the post-Games interview before. He supposed it was different now, considering there was more than one victor. His new-found cleanliness and slight haircut made him feel more exposed than ever, not covered in the familiar layer of sweat and dirt that he'd been wearing over his skin during his time spent in the arena. Finally being allowed a shower had been disorienting, to say the least.

Hot water had sluiced over his skin, and he'd watched it turn brown and red with grime and blood that he didn't even remember acquiring. It was the longest shower he'd ever had. His skin had gone a fresh pink due to the heat and sudden cleansing, and his fingers and toes had wrinkled up after being in the water for so long. He'd smelled of berries. Everything had been new and crisp and clear, like he was finally seeing after years of being blind. Perhaps he hadn't really seen or understood anything until he'd experienced the Games.

Perhaps.

He'd been force-fed a certain amount of food, just enough to satisfy him after not eating properly for so long, but not enough so that it was a shock to his system and made him sick. He'd been surprised at the amount of weight he'd lost, but he supposed that with not much to eat and lots of exercise to do, his body had nearly burned all of the fat on him. He'd almost been able to count his ribs. That action was made harder by the bruises that mottled his skin, all over his chest, waist and stomach, distorting the vision of his upper body. His skin was a sunset of blues and browns and yellows, purple curling around his hips and abdomen where Brown had been, and indigo licking across his back where Tier had thrown him to the ground. Alana had told him she thought it made him look like a rainbow. It didn't, really, not at all, but it made him laugh anyway.

Seeing Alana again had been one of the best parts of the day, really. She'd enveloped him in her arms and he'd fought back the urge to start sobbing into her chest like a little boy, smelling her sweet perfume and knotting the fabric of her pretty clothes between his fingers. He had forgotten how fond he was of her, with her gentle hands and soft voice, and her unwavering, steady support. She was lovely. She was one of the only truly beautiful parts of the Capitol; for all its sights and sensationalism, it couldn't match the natural beauty of someone with a good heart.

She'd dressed him in blue again. She'd said it complimented his eyes *and* reflected his mood. He'd laughed again, but told her that he didn't feel *blue*. He felt more *grey*, if anything. When she'd asked what that meant in terms of emotion, he'd just smiled sadly.

“Uncertain,” he'd explained.

Uncertainty wasn't his primary emotion anymore. Now, watching the playback of the Games, it was fear. It felt like he was back there, as he watched himself trudge around the arena, occasionally coming across other tributes. Bile rose in his throat at the playback of him and

Buddish: he was a destructive mess. It made him feel it all over again. And then there was Hannibal, dignified and composed, expertly manipulating the others into doing what he wanted. He tried to stop the rush of rage and betrayal as he watched Hannibal convince Tier to go after him, but failed. He shut his eyes against the onslaught of feelings once Tier finally caught up with him on screen. He couldn't bear to see what he looked like as he beat Tier's face into mush.

Bev was brave and kind and strong, even in the Games. She had an almost amusing rapport with Eva, which lessened the tense atmosphere due to the audience occasionally laughing, and set Will's nerves more at ease. He almost persuaded himself he was *relaxed*, for a little while, as he watched Bev float the two dead girls up the river, tears on her face and revolution in her eyes. But then Brown was on screen. He had to look away. He heard himself begging for mercy.

Hannibal's hand was clenched into a fist, which Will could feel pressed against his thigh. Beverly was completely and utterly still.

But then, he'd nearly been raped. It was something that he expected a reaction from.

The rest was a blur of intense conversations, mostly between him and Hannibal, and dead tributes. He tried to remain outwardly impassive to the best of his ability, but sometimes, it just didn't take. He felt his face shift in painful recall or sympathy. He knew the audience were probably *thrilled* at their responses, but there wasn't much he could do in the way of preventing them.

They played it up, all three of them. Will would alternate between beaming in pride at Bev or gazing lovingly at Hannibal. It felt cloying, and ridiculously fake. His cheeks hurt from smiling afterwards, and not one smile had been genuine. The only time he'd *stopped* smiling was when Verger placed the crown on his head, his smug, piggy face far too close to Will's for him to feel comfortable. He had to keep up the pretence even longer as they were made to sit through the Victory Banquet, but at least they had food there. It seemed richer and tastier than he remembered, but that was probably due to the tasteless plants and berries he'd been living off in the arena, and he was lucky to even get *them*- some days he hadn't eaten at *all*. His tastebuds were more sensitive now. It was almost *sad* to see the abundance of food around him, and the sheer amount of it that just wasn't eaten. Food was a second thought here. Food wasn't prioritised. These people had no idea what hunger was, and they never would. They didn't really *deserve* to, but Will hated them all the same.

It wasn't until late in the night that they arrived back at the Training Center, and were rushed off to their rooms. Hannibal shared a meaningful look with him as he exited the elevator on the first level. They hadn't really had a chance to speak since their tearful goodbye in the corridor, and Will already missed him. Tomorrow was the last day he'd get with him before they were whisked away to different Districts for the next few months. Then there was the Victory Tour.

Then there was forever.

They were to be married, after all.

“You were nearly raped?” Bev asked once they were alone, curled up on Will's bed. If he imagined really, really hard, it was almost like it was before the Games all over again.

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Oh, *Will*,” she cried, pressing her face into his neck. He felt her tears, hot and heavy, seep onto his skin. He couldn't bear to think of it, of Brown and his invasive touch, his bared teeth and animalistic stare. He couldn't breathe.

“Bev, I… I need to go,” he muttered.

“What? Where?” she asked through her tears, trying to wipe away the wetness from her cheeks.

“Just… anywhere. I'm sorry.”

“Where's anywhere?” she retaliated, and they both smiled, just a little bit. “I understand. I'm sorry if I made you dwell on it.”

“It's okay. I just need some air.”

He made his way to the balcony, pulled open the door and stepped out into the cool night air. Back in the suite, everybody was fast asleep, but outside, the Capitol was wide awake. Parades marched down the streets in an explosion of colour, chanting, shouting, and while he couldn't hear their words, he knew they were laced with joy. All of this, for him. For him, Beverly and Hannibal. He felt awed as the slight wind ruffled his hair, as gooseflesh layered his arms and cheering rang in his ears; he felt awed to be alive. He was here. He was *feeling* this. This time tomorrow he'd be tucked up in his own bed, Abigail probably having climbed in beside him, dreaming a dream of a life where he had some modicum of control. He had survived the Hunger Games.

He was a victor.

The locket was heavy against his ribs. He hadn't needed it, but some nights he'd felt it hard against his chest and known that his sister was home and she was safe. It had been a companion, a beautiful constant, one he no longer needed.

It glinted in the reflection of celebration below him as it fell. Will didn't hear it shatter.

When he returned from the balcony, he didn't head toward Beverly. Instead, Hannibal's suite revealed a slim blonde woman perched at the table. She looked up at him, a glass of wine in her hand, obviously having heard the elevator arrive. He now recognised her as Bedelia Du Maurier, the mentor for District 1. She looked him up and down, pursing her lips.

“Third door on the right,” she said, indicating to the corridor off the main space.

“Thank you.”

She didn't reply, and just went back to drinking. Now that Will was on the other side of the Games, he couldn't blame her. He understood why so many victors turned to alcohol for

comfort. He wouldn't be surprised if he ended up exactly the same.

“Come in,” was the affirmation he received after knocking on Hannibal's door. Light spilled through into the room as the door cracked open, illuminating Hannibal, who looked restless and impatient. It shifted to surprise as he saw it was Will opening the door, and sat up straight in bed. “Oh. Will.”

“Hi,” he said stupidly, shutting the door behind him and swallowing, plunging the room back into semi-darkness. Tears stung his eyes, seeing Hannibal now. The real Hannibal. The Hannibal who was well-groomed and stylish and fit right in with the people in the Capitol. This was who he'd be spending his life with. “I… I can't sleep. Not without you... I don't know how to sleep without you.”

The realisation was gutting, and a sob broke free from his mouth. Hannibal simply shifted over in the bed and opened the arm that wasn't in a sling. Will went to him immediately, crying steadily and letting himself be wrapped in Hannibal's embrace. He needed it. He needed *this*. It felt pathetic, but logically he knew he couldn't help it. He'd slept pressed together in a sleeping bag with Hannibal nearly every night in the arena. Without him, he knew he'd be lying awake for hours. This was the last night he'd get with Hannibal before he'd be sleeping miles away from him every single night, for months. He didn't know how he was going to manage it.

They lay there together for what felt like eternity, Hannibal holding him tightly against his chest,a hand tangled in his hair, until Will's tears eventually dried and he stopped trembling. He didn't move, though, couldn't bring himself to resurface from the warmth. He spoke what was on his mind.

“I thought you were betraying me back there. For a minute. I really thought...”

“I warned you the night before,” Hannibal admitted. “You were half asleep, so I'm not surprised you don't remember. But I'd been considering it a lot- how to beat Budge. I knew I might have to betray you. Or at least make it seem like I was. I suppose your not remembering was a blessing, in some sense. It made your reaction more real.”

“If you wanted a real reaction, then why tell me at all?”

“I...” He sighed, dropping his forehead onto the crown of Will's head. He smelt like berries as well. “The idea of you, believing you'd been betrayed by me, it wasn't appealing. It had occurred too many times before.” There was regret in his voice, and Will felt a pang of sympathy. “I hate it when you're angry with me,” Hannibal added, hushed, humbled.

“Well that time doesn't really count,” Will comforted. “You didn't mean it. And it's not like it really matters, it didn't work anyway.” Hannibal stilled below him, almost ceased to breathe. Will gathered his courage. “Did you mean for it to fail? Did you want him to realise you were lying? I can never tell with you.”

“No,” Hannibal answered. “I didn't mean for it to fail. I'd known for a while I might have to make it seem as if I was betraying you. But I'd only factored in the plan of there being two victors an hour or so before. I thought it could succeed.”

“So you just…”

“Saw your face and let on that I cared for you? Yes.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be. The fault was mine.”

Will knew that he didn't mean it cruelly, but it still stung a little. Will had made him fail. Will had made him fault. He just shut his eyes against the mixed emotions, burying himself further in Hannibal's arms. So much had happened between them, and Hannibal had done so many terrible things, but none of it really seemed to matter. Not now. The Games were a thing of the past, and there were worse things to come. They would need each other in the following years, to face whatever President Verger had in store for them. It wasn't like Hannibal sending somebody to kill him and deceiving him into eating human meat didn't *hurt*, because it *really* did, but Will had forgiven him, surprisingly. He *had*. He cared too much for Hannibal to still be stuck on what had transpired in the Games. What he had to think about now was the future.

“What now?” He shocked himself by saying it. He hadn't meant to.

“I don't know,” Hannibal whispered. It was the second time he'd said that today. Will had never known him to be so *unsure*- there had been a while, after they'd first met, after they'd first become allies, that he'd thought Hannibal knew the answer to everything. But now there was a new element of vulnerability in everything he said, an element of doubt. Hannibal didn't know everything. Will loved him all the more for it.

Will loved him. Hannibal was his *friend*, and Will loved him for it.

“I think the President knows the answer to that,” he remarked bitterly. “Our entire future together is planned out. You heard, right? We're *betrothed*.”

“Is the idea of marrying me really so repulsive?” He hoped he was imagining the hurt in Hannibal's voice.

“Don't be stupid. It's not you. It's our lack of choice.”

“I suppose that happens to all the victors. How many of them still have the privilege of choice after the Games?”

“Not like *this*.”

Hannibal didn't reply. He couldn't, and Will understood. What could he say to that? There was nothing *anybody* could say. They were to be married, and that was that. Their whole lives were planned, now. There wasn't anything they could do about it, no method of escaping their fate. They lay there in silence for what felt like hours, the darkness enfolding Will in its endlessness, Hannibal's steady heartbeat under his ear lulling him into exhaustion.

“Why did you trust me to kill him?” he asked, feeling sleep threatening to claim him, forcing him to ask the last question he needed answered.

“I trust you completely. I trust you with my life.”

“You knew I might've missed. You *knew*.”

“I had faith in you. I *see* you.”

See?

That was the basis of it, really. The basis of their friendship, of their *connection*. They *saw* each other. Hannibal saw Will clearer than anybody had, saw even the dark, ugly parts that nobody had. And Will saw Hannibal. He saw the humanity in Hannibal. He wasn't just some bored, rich, pre-made victor who was desperate to be in the Capitol. He was pained and broken and beautiful.

“Thank you.”

That was how he slept, protected in Hannibal's arms, knowing it would be the last time for a while that he would get this. He could've dreamed of the arena, of the shelter it brought him and the trauma it caused. He could've dreamed of Hannibal's face as they were announced victors, the relief, the awe, the *hope*. He could've dreamed of the Capitol and its cheers and colours crowding through the streets.

But he just dreamed of nothingness.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How did it feel? When the President announced that you could all live?”

The question was directed at Will. Chilton had gone fairly easy on him throughout the interview- Beverly and Hannibal were far more interesting, and held an alluring sense of mystery that he hadn't quite been able to muster before and during the Games. He was thankful for that now. All his questions had been based around love. It was interesting really, the way they were setting up for a romance but not directly addressing it, keeping up the farce of subtlety for the Capitol; they probably had some special events planned for the Victory Tour. It kept people *intrigued.* Thankfully, they were intrigued by the romance itself, and not by him. He was the token middle caught up in the love triangle. He wasn't all that special, and it was Beverly and Hannibal they really wanted to know about. He was mostly just glad that Chilton hadn't brought up Brown. At least he had some class.

“I don't think I've ever been so relieved in my life,” he answered with a fake, nostalgic smile. “To come out of there with my two closest friends… I was so grateful. I don't know what I'd do without them.”

Chilton smiled, seemingly touched. It wasn't a *lie*, technically. But he avoided the truths that would have him admitting that he was stunned and sceptical as well, unable to believe that what the sinister voice on the livespeakers was saying was true. He'd really believed it could all be some big trick, that he'd be led into an isolated room and killed for disobedience. Killed for sport.

“What do you think it will be like, spending the next few months without Hannibal after not leaving his side for so long?”

Now that one stumped him. He'd thought about it, of *course* he'd thought about it, but talking about it in a real context was far harder than he'd imagined. He searched for the right words. He'd mostly been spewing the loved-up falsities he thought the Capitol would want to hear, the majority of which was riddled with lies and false feelings. But maybe sometimes telling the truth would suffice.

“It's going to be really hard,” he admitted. He really did mean it. “I'm so used to him now, and… I don't even get to work up to it. He's just going to be *gone*.” Everyone was quiet. He glanced to Hannibal, who looked saddened. Will knew he was exaggerating it for the cameras. “I'm going to miss him,” he added.

“And you, Hannibal?” Chilton asked.

“I never dreamed I would meet anyone like Will. To have him taken away from me now, after all we've been through… it's nothing less than a tragedy.”

Their last interview had been a complete success, and Freddie remarked on this as she herded him and Bev from their suite on the fourth floor, clutching what little belongings they had brought with them. The Capitol would simply *love* the teasing insights into any developing romances, apparently. Will couldn't really care less now that it was over. He wouldn't half miss Hannibal, but the idea of months passing without worrying about constantly keeping up appearances sounded like heaven. He needed a break.

They were told to wait down in the lobby of the Training Center for the car, where they would be taken to the train station. And then taken home. *Home*. God, he had missed it. It felt like the homesickness was encompassing him all in one big rush, like he hadn't quite felt it properly before. Perhaps he hadn't. Perhaps he hadn't considered the fact that he might *actually get to go back*. He had just assumed he'd never see it again, when he first left. From then on he'd tried not to think on it too much. But now, it was real. This was *real*.

“Beverly,” came a smooth voice from behind them. It was Hannibal. It was always Hannibal. “This is where I must say goodbye, I'm afraid- we're to take different trains. It has been a pleasure knowing you, and I look forward to seeing you again.”

“Don't be a stranger,” she said, and Hannibal smiled at her softly.

“Will, may I have a word?” he asked, diverting his attention. “In private?”

Will nodded, letting Hannibal lead him him away from the lobby. He saw Bev grinning after them, and knew he'd be getting an earful on the way home. He dreaded it, but it sort of made him feel a little more normal. This was the way they used to speak about romantic interests with each other, lightly teasing to coax out information. This wasn't quite the same, though. Hannibal wasn't the same. It wasn't like that. Hannibal stilled Will with a hand on his shoulder as they arrived in a deserted corridor.

“Will,” he murmured. “I have been deliberating on how to say goodbye to you, but I don't quite know how. Nothing seems to mean enough.”

“It doesn't need to. It isn't goodbye forever,” Will argued. “It's *okay*. We'll see each other again.”

“I know, but I...” Hannibal trailed off. His gaze was far away, and he was staring at some distant spot behind Will's head. He took a deep breath. “When I volunteered for the Games, I never quite considered a turn of events that involved friendship. It was the furthest thing from my mind. As has it always been. It's been a long time since I really connected with somebody, since I really ended up caring for somebody. But then you...”

“Hannibal-”

“Will, you came along, and you changed everything.” Hannibal was looking at him now, eyes boring straight back into Will's. Will didn't want to break the eye contact, for maybe the first time in his life. “I have never quite felt the way I do for you before. You are entirely new, and entirely unique. These next few months without you will be excruciating. I shall think of you every day.”

“You know I feel the same.”

“I don't think I do know that,” Hannibal disagreed. “And I don't think you do.”

Will frowned, but Hannibal didn't look upset, or angry, or even confused. He looked rapt. He was gazing at Will in awe, entranced, drunk, and his hand moved from Will's shoulder to brush away a rampant curl that had fallen in his face, using it as an excuse to drift down from Will's hair to his cheek, where he rested his warm and open palm. Will didn't say a word.

Hannibal shut his eyes, and kissed him.

It wasn't a proper kiss, not really. Hannibal just pressed his lips against Will's then pulled away again. Will barely had time to shut his eyes before it was over. He'd never experienced a kiss so chaste, so fleeting, so *dispassionate*. But Hannibal's lips were soft and warm and Will wanted it again and again, chasteness and all. His stomach flipped as Hannibal moved away swiftly, reminding him that he *really* wanted this to be something that it wasn't. But it was clear what it was.

It was a taster.

They might have to spend the rest of their lives together. They might have to *marry*. This would involve kissing in public. It was best to move past that awkwardness now than be put on the spot in front of cameras, right? It made sense. It was just a little odd that Hannibal hadn't actually *said* that. He was probably just assuming Will understood. Which he reluctantly did. The kiss didn't mean a thing. It was Hannibal's quaint and eccentric way of practising for the rest of their lives together. But Will wanted more.

Will wanted Hannibal to push him against the wall and *take*, or better yet, for *him* to push Hannibal against the wall and take. He wanted Hannibal's hands and his mouth and his everything. He just wished he had the courage to ask.

“Sweet Will,” Hannibal whispered, riveted. His mouth was half-open, his eyes were unmoving. “You truly are beautiful.”

Staring back into Hannibal's dark eyes felt like drowning. It felt like dying.

“Goodbye, Hannibal,” he said, voice less wrecked than he'd imagined it would be.

“Goodbye, Will.”

Hannibal walked away. He reached the end of the corridor and looked back, meeting Will's eyes. He smiled, and disappeared round the corner.

Will knew it was the last he was going to see of him before the Victory Tour. It was a shame, but at least he had something to remember him by. He ghosted his fingertips across his lips in shock, feeling Hannibal's phantom kiss there, ignoring the pang of his heart. He knew what the kiss had meant, it had been nothing, but his words afterwards were the most baffling. Hannibal hadn't meant it like *that*, of course, but Will was at a loss for what he'd actually meant. What could there be to gain from calling Will beautiful? Was it a District 1 nicety- did

they all call each other beautiful? Was it the perfect, meaningful goodbye he'd been hoping to achieve?

“Did you make out?” Bev asked, taunting, once he returned to the lobby.

“Don't be an idiot.”

“It's a serious question! He dragged you off somewhere private and marched back in here ten minutes later looking all flustered. What am I supposed to think?”

“He wasn't *flustered*.”

“He couldn't look me in the eye.”

“Shut *up*.”

She laughed, and everything was okay. Her laugh made him think of spring, of new flowers in bloom and the bright, re-emerging sun. Spring meant fresh starts. Going home again would be exactly that. He was itching to be there, now- once they climbed into the car and the journey had started, it felt like the longest trip in the world awaited him. He thought of Abigail, of seeing her again, of seeing her face after he kept his promise to stay alive. He didn't look forward to the questions he'd get involvinh Hannibal from his mother and sister, but it was a burden he was willing to bear. Even the bad seemed good, after all this. He'd missed them so much. He'd take any kind of questions, despite how embarrassing they were.

When they entered the train, the first thing he did was move to the window. He wanted to watch the Capitol disappear as the train swept them away. So he did: he watched the colours blur together as the city shrunk into the distance, watched the colours blur like rain.

When the rain stopped, it would be clearer.

When the rain stopped, he would be able to *see*.

Chapter End Notes

so... we're here. wow. thank you all so much for the amazing feedback, the response i received for this was nothing short of amazing.

part 2 of the series begins here and now!!!

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